



WINDSTAR
By
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Chapter One

Angela Evans was stunned when she rang the bell and Rory Keith, himself, answered the door. She actually took a step back in surprise--her face turning red--as she encountered his world-famous cocky grin and the blue-green-gray--what the heck color *were* his eyes?--that crinkled so merrily at the corners.

"Angela?" he asked in the Scottish brogue that set the hearts of women young and old racing recklessly.

"Yes, sir," Angela managed to say, taking the strong, tanned hand he held out to her and feeling positively fragile as he encompassed it within his own.

"Come on in!" he said, drawing her with him into the airy expanse of his New York loft apartment. "Terrible day to be out interviewing, isn't it?"

She could only nod, for she was lost in that handsome face she'd spent hours watching on movie and television screens. His hand was warm covering hers, and that smile--oh, God that smile--was doing shameful things to her libido.

"I love bad weather, myself," he said, finally releasing her hand as he fanned it toward the sitting area of the loft. "You can't be born in Scotland and not like the rain."

A tremulous smile hovered on Angela's lips as she followed him to the plush sofa and took a seat at his urging. She couldn't look away from the crisp white cotton shirt and black jeans that hugged his muscular frame so lovingly. That he was barefooted just made her melt inside.

"How 'bout you?" he asked in that brogue that sent shivers down her spine.

"I'm not fond of bad weather," she said, "even though I grew up on the Gulf Coast of Florida and we have more than our share of storms coming in." She flinched, telling herself she had given far more detail than he'd required.

His eyes lit up and his expressive mouth did the cute little quirking of his upper lip that was his trademark. "You're a southern woman!" he exclaimed. "God, I love your accent!" He took a seat across from her, leaning forward so his elbows rested on his knees. "Please tell me you know how to make good sweetened tea."

Angela's left eyebrow crooked upward. "You like sweet tea?"

He was like a little boy as he sat hunched there, his smile bright and his eyes dancing. "When I was in Pensacola filming, I fell in love with southern food. God, barbeque ribs and cornbread and" He groaned. "When I asked the agency to find me a housekeeper, I wanted to make sure she knew how to cook fried okra and make sweet tea."

"It's fried okrie," she corrected, unable to keep from grinning as broadly as did he. "Tea with or without lemon?"

"Oh, with! Definitely with!" he replied. "When can you start?"

She laughed. "To make the tea or as your housekeeper?"

"Both!" he answered and was on his feet, holding out a hand. "Let's go do it now!"

His words drove straight through Angela's soul. Making tea wasn't what she would have liked to be doing with him, but as he pulled her up and began walking her to the kitchen part of the loft with her hand cupped in his, she followed willingly, looking

up at the nape of his neck where the curly brown hair just brushed his collar.

"I've Earl Grey," he said. "Will that do?"

She hated to tell him that it wouldn't. "Actually Tetley loose tea would be"

"Let me get my shoes! There's a market 'round the corner," he said, letting go of her hand and practically sprinting away from her to disappear down the hallway.

She laughed as she heard him rummaging around in his bedroom. The man was a vortex of nervous energy and everything he did, he did at breakneck speed.

Outside it was pouring rain with lightning flashing now and then to light up the large expanse of windows in the loft. When he returned, he had on a baseball cap, tennis shoes without socks, and what she had come to realize must be a favorite leather coat for she'd seen him wearing it in several of his movies.

"I'll ring down and have the car sent for us straight away," he said, picking up the receiver.

She watched him, thinking he had to be the handsomest man she'd ever seen. Tall and thoroughly masculine, she could imagine he broke at least a dozen female hearts a week just by flashing those mesmerizing green eyes and that crooked grin. Single--and supposedly quite content to remain that way--he had been linked with every Hollywood goddess coming down the pike and the paparazzi pictured him with women who were constantly hinting marriage was in the works. It was going to be a challenge to work for a man who she wanted to throw down on the rug and have her way with.

"That was a strange expression," he said, cocking his head to one side. "What were you thinking?"

Angela felt the heat branching up her neck and into her cheeks. "I'll never tell," she said and when he slowly grinned at her, she knew damned well he had some idea of where her feeble mind had flown.

"Don't fall too deeply in love with me before you make my tea, wench," he teased, opening the door for her.

"I'll try not to," she countered.

"Good, 'cause it gets so bloody boring, you know?"

"Having to fight off the girls?" she asked as she walked out into the hall.

"Girls, guys, damned Labrador retrievers, too!" he replied with a hand to the small of her back.

She reached for the umbrella she'd propped outside his door, but he tugged her away from it.

"You won't need it," he promised.

She stumbled along in his wake, for he was like a tornado of nervous energy as he stabbed repeatedly at the button on the private elevator, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. He reminded her so vividly of her sons when they were boys.

"Trying to quit," he said, "and I'm climbing the walls."

She knew he meant smoking. "Have you tried hard candy?"

He snapped his fingers. "Lemon drops! Aye, remind me to grab a few hundred bags at the market!"

Angela laughed.

"Ah, now that's just cruel," he said. "I bet you don't smoke."

She shook her head. "Never have, never will."

"Evil woman," he pronounced in that sexy brogue. "Rub it in, why doncha?"

"Mind over matter," she told him.

"If you don't mind, it don't matter, huh?" he queried, wagging his dark brows.

The elevator door opened and he ushered her inside, standing so close to her she could smell his expensive cologne. She felt him looking down at her, and she looked up to see him staring at her, his eyes dancing with merriment, his lips twitching in a reckless grin.

"So, tell me about you," he said. He leaned over. "I don't see a wedding band."

"Divorced," she said.

"Ah ...," he drawled, nodding sagely. "Kids?"

"Two grown sons and two grandkids," she replied.

"Whoa!" he said, sparkling eyes flaring wide. "I've got meself a real live Granny! What are the odds of that?" He slipped his arm around her shoulders and hugged her. "Just what I've been needing! Someone to take me in hand and make me a good boy."

Angela felt his touch all the way to her toes. She was pressed up close to his side as he briefly hugged her then let her go. His entire attitude was so infectiously, almost manic, and she found herself relaxing with him as though she'd known him for years.

"Did they tell you at the agency that you'll have to sleep with me?" he asked, his gaze wicked, his lips twitching with humor.

"I believe they mentioned it would be a live-in job," she said.

"Noooo," he said, drawing out the brogue. "I mean sleep *with* me?" he said, nudging her with his hip.

"I don't think so. I imagine you snore," she countered, knowing he was teasing.

"I do not!" he said, highly offended. "I might breathe heavily but I don't snore, wench!"

She shook her head at his playfulness. When the elevator settled and he once more put a hand to the small of her back, she felt like the sexiest, prettiest woman alive. She knew damned well she was very lucky, for millions of women would give their left teat to be where she was at that moment.

He was as friendly and personable to those in the lobby of the building where he lived and to the doorman, who held the car door for them beneath the sweep of a huge umbrella. As he scooted into the backseat with her, he waved at several women who had stopped to stare with open mouths.

"Think they'll drown if they stay that way?" he asked with a boyish chuckle then made a gurgling sound.

"How old are you?" she asked, laughing at his antics.

"Thirty-seven going on ten, my mom says," he replied and then began tapping out a rhythm on his knees. "I need them lemon drops."

"Yes, you do," she said and fished in her purse for a piece of peppermint candy, which she handed over. "Here, suck on this."

He stunned her by grabbing her hand and sticking her thumb in his mouth. The warmth and wetness of his mouth made her womb clench and heat flood between her legs. She could only stare at him as he sucked hard on her thumb, and then took it out of

his mouth with a loud popping sound.

“Oh, you meant the candy, didn’t ya?” he chortled, plucking the candy out of her hand to unwrap it. He tossed it into his mouth with a wide grin.

“Are you always this strange, Mr. Keith?” she asked.

“Mr. Keith was my Dad. I’m Rory,” he replied. “And I’m not strange, just a bit daft. Ask anyone.” He leaned over the front sea and pointed at the market. “Over there.”

Their time inside the market was like a trip to a fun house. He took charge of the cart and piled things into it that caught his eye. Questioning every purchase she made, wanting to know what it was for and how she’d use it, he was like an inquisitive toddler who--at one point--shook his head firmly when she put a bunch of asparagus in the cart.

“No,” he said. “I draw the line at vegetables with names I can’t spell. Besides, that shit is slimy when it’s cooked.”

“I’m not going to cook it,” she told him and put the asparagus back in the cart.

He narrowed his eyes. “Then whatcha gonna do with it?”

“You’ll see,” she said and continued on down the vegetable bins.

“Something evil, I bet,” he said, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“Utterly wicked,” she agreed.

“Are you gonna make me eat healthy shit?” he asked with a sniff.

“I’m gonna make you eat healthy food,” she replied. “If you want to eat shit, you can do so when I’m not looking.” She stared him in the eyes.

The left side of his mouth quirked up and he stunned her again by bending over and kissing her on the cheek. “I like you, wench,” he pronounced then strolled off, abandoning the cart, looking for the gods only knew what among the aisles.

By the time Angie pushed the cart to the checkout, he was surrounded by three women and a little girl who were all looking up at him with complete adoration. You could almost hear the estrogen bubbling away.

“Gotta go, now,” she heard him say. “The warden is shooting daggers at me.”

All four females turned to glare at Angie, and she could have sworn one of them actually growled at her. She rolled her eyes as he came strutting up to her and dropped something into the cart. She looked down at it then up at him, one eyebrow arched.

“A man has his needs,” he defended his purchase.

“Umm,” she said, eyeing the issue of Playboy with a smirk.

“I buy it for the articles,” he said with a straight face.

“Sure you do,” she agreed.

As they waited to checkout, he plundered through the cart. Spying a bottle of Bloody Mary mix, he picked it up and the smile left his face. “I can’t have this in the apartment.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

“I can’t have booze in the ...”

She had read all about his drinking problem and how he’d spent several months in a rehab center earlier in the year. He was upfront about the boozing whenever he was interviewed.

“The mix is for the asparagus and the green beans,” she told him.

“Ugh,” he said with a snarl, his upper lip quirked. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Trust me,” she said, taking the bottle out of his hand and putting it back in the cart.

“I think I’d rather have the shit,” he mumbled, then winked at the cashier who was staring at him with lust in her eyes. “Gimme that bag of lemon drops, darlin’.”

The cashier obediently handed over the candy and laughed when he broke the bag open and crammed several into his mouth.

There were things in the cart Angie had not seen him sneak in there, and when he crammed his hand into his pocket to pull out two hundred dollar bills, she was amazed at the total. Happy to hear the groceries would be delivered to the loft and they wouldn’t have to lug them out into the rain, she took the hand he offered and started out the door.

On the sidewalk, several fans rushed him wanting autographs and he obliged every one of them, posing for several throwaway camera shots with the giggling, salivating females. With his long arms draped around the girls’ shoulders, he mugged for the shots then kissed each girl on the forehead before finally grabbing Angie’s hand and sprinting for the car, squealing girls close behind. They barely made it inside before the driver--used to squiring Rory around town--pulled away from the curb.

“How ‘bout I buy you supper tonight, then you can start cooking for me tomorrow?” he asked, popping a few more lemon drops in his mouth.

“What are you in the mood for?” she asked, shaking his head when he offered a lemon drop.

“Wild, passionate monkey sex in front of the fireplace on me bear skin rug,” he answered.

She chuckled, getting used to his teasing. “Before or after we eat?”

He leaned over, his broad shoulder bumping hers a couple of times. “I was thinking of having you as the meal. How’s that?”

“Behave!” she said, shoving him away. “You are incorrigible.”

“I can’t be something I can’t spell,” he countered, crunching the candy noisily.

Angie shook her head at him. She knew he’d graduated with honors from Glasgow University, so his self-deprecating comments were comical.

“I like Chinese food,” he said. “Mexican, Italian, some Indian, and barbeque ribs.” He twisted around in the seat to face her. “How ‘bout sharing a poo-poo plate?”

She pursed her lips, not about to let him get that one past her. “I don’t share my poo-poo with anyone, mister. I want my own.”

He grinned. “You got it!” Snaking out a hand, he gripped the driver’s shoulder. “You know that place we went a few weeks ago?” At the driver’s nod, Rory told him to head over there. “Will you go in for us?”

“I think I’d better this time,” the driver said.

Angie looked at Rory as he sat back in the seat. “What happened last time?”

Rory shrugged. “I practically got raped,” he said. “Walked funny for a week.”

The driver laughed. “I’ve never seen anybody run as fast as he did and dive into my backseat!”

“Damned women nearly tore me clothes off!” Rory complained.

He kept up a constant barrage of silliness, asking questions about her that she felt uncomfortable answering while the driver went in and ordered their supper.

“How old *are* you?” he asked at one point when she reminded him she was old enough to be his mother.

“Twenty years older than you,” she answered.

He gawked at her, eyes wide. “God, that *is* old! Should we stop and get you a walker on the way home? Do you need an oxygen tank or something? How ‘bout a new pair of support hose?”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“Did you buy some fiber ‘cause I ran out when me own Granny was here last?” he queried. “Oh, oh, oh ... and did you remember to get some Depends? We can’t have you pissing all over the place and ...”

“Will you shut up?” she asked and dug her elbow into his ribs.

He shot out an arm to capture her shoulders, bringing her beneath his arm to plant his chiseled chin on the top of her head. “Don’t worry, Granny. I’ll take good care of you in your declining years.” He placed a kiss on her hair.

All the way home, all the way up in the elevator, he kept cracking her up with his antics. In the lobby of his building, he acutely embarrassed her as his driver and a bellman took possession of their purchases and brought them up in the elevator. He had a tight grip on Angela’s hand, swinging it like a child would.

“Me Granny’s gonna cook me supper and we’re gonna eat it on the floor!” he told the bellman who was apparently used to his famous resident’s quirky nature.

“Is that so?” the man asked. “And just what is your Granny gonna cook you, young sir?”

“Anything I want!” Rory stated, bumping his hip against Angela.

“Will you behave?” she whispered out the side of her mouth.

“Your Granny’s gonna take a switch to you if you don’t,” the bellman said with a twitch of his lips.

The sexy actor put his head on Angela’s shoulder. “I’ll be a good boy, Granny!”

“Stop it!” she laughed, pushing him away.

Once inside the apartment, he let go of her hand but ushered her with a gentle push on her back into the kitchen.

“I’m a growing boy and I’m starving,” he announced.

“I thought you only wanted a glass of tea,” she complained as the bellman and driver placed the purchases on the counters.

“I’m hungry!” her new boss said with a pout of his world-famous lips. He stomped his foot. “I’m hungry, I’m hungry, I’m hungry!”

“Better feed him, miss,” the driver suggested dryly. “He can be a real corker when he’s like this.”

“Well, he could get down on the floor and kick his heels but I won’t ...”

And the award-winning matinee idol whose sexy body and soulful eyes haunted the dreams of women throughout the world did just that, stretching out on his back and kicking his heels, bawling like a baby, fists to his eyes.

“I’m hungry! I’m hungry! I’m *hungry*!” he repeated. “I ain’t never had no fried potatoes and salmon croquettes!”

“Will you stop?” she gasped, laughing so hard tears had come into her eyes. “I’ll

cook the darn food, okay?"

He shot up from the floor with a ridiculous grin plastered on his chiseled features and wrapped his arms around her and nudged his chin into the hollow at the side of her neck. "You're such a good Granny. You're so good to little Rory John."

"I'm gonna spank little Rory John's fanny if he doesn't stop pestering me," she told him.

His hands went to her shoulders. He pulled her against him and with his lips to her ear whispered in a sensuous voice, "Can I hold you to that?"

She wriggled out of his light grip and swatted at him. "Out! Out of my kitchen right now or you'll end up with takeout tonight!"

He held his hands up in surrender. "I'm going. I'm going!"

As she prepared their supper she could hear him in the living area. He was running dialogue with the bellman. It must have been something the two did often, for they seemed very comfortable in the roles they were playing. Only once did Rory venture back into the kitchen to check on her and she ran him out of the kitchen, with a snap of a dish towel.

By the time she brought the crisply fried croquettes, chunky fried potatoes smothered in diced onion and green pepper, sliced tomato and cucumber salad and piping hot slabs of Texas toast slathered with garlic butter, Rory was stretched out before the fire on a plaid blanket, propped up on a mound of pillows.

"Where's me sweetened tea, wench?" he demanded.

"Hold your horses, Attila," she quipped. "Here, take this." She handed him the tray then went back in the kitchen for the tea.

"It's Mr. Attila to you, you saucy girl!" he called out.

He was sitting tailor fashion on the blanket when she came back, a plate of food already in his lap, another he'd prepared for her sitting beside him.

"I can't eat all that!" she protested as she dropped to her knees. She eyed the mound of potatoes and the three croquettes.

"I can," he stated and plucked two of the croquettes from her plate and dropped them onto his. He was about to scoop up some of the potatoes but she slapped at his hand.

"Touch my taters and die, bagpipe boy!"

Rory Keith laughed like a school boy. He watched her pick up her plate. "Want me to say Grace?" he asked.

She looked at him with surprise. "Would you?"

"Sure," he said. He closed his eyes, bowed his head and in a soft, gentle voice said, "Grace." He wedged one eye open, looked at her and then grinned.

"You're incorrigible!" she pronounced.

"Don't know what that means and can't spell it," he said, then proceeded to say the Catholic blessing over the meal, surprising her even more. When he made the sign of the cross, she echoed the action.

"You a Papist, too, wench?" he asked, digging into the potatoes.

"I am."

"Good. I need somebody to remind me about Holy Days."

She glanced down at the blanket. "Is this your tartan pattern?"

He made a rude sound. "Hell, no! I wouldn't eat on me own colors, wench." His mouth crooked into a smirk. "This is the heathen Ferguson plaid, Protestants as they be."

"I see," she said, knowing his best friend was the late-night talk show host who was part of that heathen clan.

She took a bite of her croquette. "Do you have a kilt?"

"And a ghillie shirt, a jabot, Balmoral hat, flashes, sporran and all the other stuff," he said and then explained what each was.

"I'd like to see you in full highland dress," she said, thinking that would be quite the sight.

He picked up the croquette and chomped off a large piece, his eyes lighting up with pleasure. "There are onions in there!"

"Only way to cook them," she replied.

He munched away, eyes rolling with pleasure, and then swallowed loudly. She knew he was about to say something irreverent and adorable when his eyes widened and his expressive lips arched. "I don't wear highland dresses, by the way. The long skirts get in the way of me running and the bodice is too tight on me chest." He grinned nastily. "That's why I wear me kiltie although ..."

She cocked a brow. "Although what?"

"I'm at me best when I'm wearing nothing at all," he said with a wink.

It was that way the rest of the evening as they ate in front of the fire on the bear skin rug. He kept her in stitches and when she told him she needed to go home, he seemed reluctant to allow her to leave.

"You can stay here tonight and we'll go get your stuff in the morning," he suggested.

"I don't have anything to sleep in," she said and realized as soon as she'd said it that she'd played right into his game.

"I sleep in the buff, so you can too," he said and when she would have chastised him, he held up a hand. "Or you can borrow one of my shirts." He wagged his brows. "There are women the world over who'd love to get in my shirt."

"I don't doubt that," she said and gave him an arch look. "Your pants, too."

"Damned straight," he said with a smirk.

They took the remains of their supper into the kitchen and disposed of the Styrofoam plates.

"You know what you didn't do?" she asked.

"Have wild monkey sex?"

"Show me where I'll be staying," she said.

He took her hand, pulled her toward the back of the loft. "Bad Rory," he labeled himself, slapping the palm of his other hand against his forehead. "Bad, bad Rory."

The room to which he took her had a lovely queen-size bed, a large armoire, a dresser, two night tables and a wall-hung plasma TV next to a very comfortable sitting area with a sofa, loveseat, two chairs, a desk with a credenza and occasional tables. The room had its own bath and a little balcony that faced north.

"If you don't like the colors, you can paint it whatever you like. Don't like the furniture, you can change it. Don't like the room period, tough shit. Unless, of course,

you want to bunk with me.”

“This will do nicely, thank you,” she said. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

He walked her to the door, scuffing his bare feet on the polished parquet flooring. “I wish you’d stay,” he said and she finally understood that he didn’t want to be alone.

“I’ll be back first thing in the morning,” she said. “What time do you get up?”

“Whenever I wake up,” he replied, then held up a finger. “Wait a minute.”

She watched him jog over to a credenza in the dining area of the loft. He came back with a key.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then,” she said.

“Yeah,” he agreed and for the first time he didn’t smile.

“And we’ll have a very healthy breakfast.”

He nodded and reached behind her to open the door for her. As she went out, he stood in the doorway and watched her until the elevator door opened and she was inside. There was such loneliness on his face, she was almost inclined to stay, when the doors slid shut.

* * * *

Rory closed the door and leaned his back against it, his head down, hands behind him on the doorknob. He hated being alone and avoided it every chance he got. Not for the first time, he thought of getting a pet but with his erratic schedule, he hadn’t felt it would be fair to the animal. But when the night closed in and the walls seem to shrink it around him, he longed for someone to talk to. It was the nights that were the longest for him and that was the time he’d spent years drinking himself into a stupor to blot out the loneliness.

The youngest of nine children, he had never spent a day or his life without tons of relatives surrounding him until he had graduated from the university and took a job he had hated with a passion. They’d stuck him in an office without a window and he had developed an acute case of claustrophobia. Had he not been dating a girl who insisted he try out for a play in which she’d been given the lead, he would not have discovered his love of performing, and the world would never have known he existed.

Sighing, he pushed away from the door and went into the living area, turning the CD player on as loud as his ears could stand it. There were scripts his agent had sent over but he wasn’t in the mood for reading. He stared at the TV for a moment then decided he preferred the sound of rock and roll blaring at him. Flopping down on the sofa, he stretched out with an arm over his eyes, bringing one knee up so he could tap out a rhythm to the beat.

“I like her,” he said aloud, thinking of the overweight woman with the short salt-and-pepper hair who the agency had sent to him. She had a sweet smile, a wicked grin and she gave as good as she got.

“I don’t want a beauty queen or someone who’ll get notions,” he’d instructed the woman at the agency. “I want a middle-aged lady who will be hard working and honest and sensible. She has to know how to make fried okra.”

Angela Evans had been that and more. She had a sense of humor and he desperately needed that. His personal assistant, Bobby, had been born with a stick up his ass and rarely smiled, much less joked.

“She can’t be encumbered ‘cause she’ll be traveling with me,” he’d demanded. “She has to be really organized because she’ll be taking care of four different houses on two continents.”

Angie could handle that, he decided, and not break a sweat.

He wished she’d stayed, for the evening was beginning to close in on him despite the loud noise of U-2 in the background. Letting his arm fall behind his head, he stared up at the loft’s ceiling, tracing the pipes that had been turned into a form of artwork by his decorator. With a hiss of irritation, he got up and headed for the pack of cigarettes he’d tried desperately to stay away from all day.

“Mind over matter,” he heard Angie—and that was how he thought of her—saying and his hand trembled over the pack. He closed his hand, flexed it, running his fingers up and down the palm, and then snarled before turning around and heading for the bag of lemon drops.

For almost an hour he sat there with his legs crossed on the cocktail table, his ass nearly falling off the edge of the sofa, slumped with the candy bags in his lap until he had consumed enough lemon drops to give himself a royal belly ache. Z-2 became the Korrs and he mellowed out to the Celtic music, closing his eyes to concentrate on the words. His breathing slowed and he drifted off, his overly active mind taking him into a dream world he hadn’t planned on entering. ...

* * * *

“Whatcha looking for?” he asked as he caught up with Angie.

“Stuff,” she answered and kept walking, ignoring him.

He turned to face her, walking backward so he could look at her. “What kind of stuff?”

“Granny stuff,” she replied. She was wearing a long calico gown and perched atop her head was an old fashioned sunbonnet.

“You need to act your age,” he informed her and moved directly in front of her so she had to come up short, lest she bowl him over.

“I *am* acting my age,” she said. “You need to act yours.”

“I have an old soul,” he said and put a hand to her cheek to cup it gently.

“I have shoes older than you,” she sniffed.

“Not the kind of soul I meant,” he countered and ran his thumb over her lower lip. She batted his hand away and stepped around him. “I have stuff to get.”

Rory Keith had never had a woman ignore him in his entire life. To his way of thinking, it wasn’t right and he shot out a hand to grip her arm and pull her back, dragging her against him, her pudgy body molding tightly to his.

“I’ve got your stuff right here, wench,” he growled and lowered his head to claim her lips.

It was a kiss unlike any he’d ever experienced. He probed her mouth with his tongue—tasting her, sensing her, staking claim—as his hands tightened on her upper arms and he ground the lower part of his body against her belly. It was a wild, savage kiss and it affected him in such a way it propelled him rudely from his dreaming and into the harsh, lonely expanse of reality.

* * * *

Rory sat up with a gasp, his eyes flaring wide, his heart racing, his cock as hard as steel pressing against the front of his jeans. He was so unnerved by the images still flowing through his mind he could barely lift a shaking hand to plow through his hair.

“Mother of God!” he whispered. “What the fuck was that?”

* * * *

Across town in the rented room where Angela lay tossing and turning in bed, her dreams had carried her to a place she had visited many times in her daydreams and night visions alike. It was a fanciful setting from one of Rory Keith’s medieval adventure movies and, as it always did, it beckoned to her to enter and stay a while.

The keep was alight with rushes sputtering in the cold north wind. Ice rimed the battlements as the guards wrapped in heavy furs walked their hourly tours of the crenulated walls. Snug for the duration, the drawbridge was locked into place, the portcullis lowered, and the inner bailey bare of human life. Deadly creatures that dwelt in the moat were in their underwater caves or buried deep in the wallows along the water’s edge. A dog barked, a cat screeched, but otherwise the fortress of Lord Kendryck MacPhee, Earl of Silvarn, was silent and secure with the inhabitants lying in bed on this frigid winter night as sleet plucked at the mullioned windows.

She dreamt she was walking up the curving stone staircase to the high laird’s chamber high atop the fortress. She could feel the bite of the cold air on her shoulders through the thin wool shawl and the flimsy soles of her slippers. In one hand she carried a silver tray upon which sat the nightly posset brewed for Lord Kendryck by the court’s physician, Vardar Brock, while the other held her long wool skirt as she climbed.

There were guards to either side of the Earl’s door and they barely gave her a glance as she neared them upon reaching the fourth floor of the keep. She knocked lightly on the portal though neither man deigned to open the door for her when the call from beyond the thick oak panel bid her enter the laird’s chamber.

The room smelled of sandalwood and myrrh as she fumbled the latch and pushed the heavy door open, the scents wafting over her as she walked softly into the presence of her master, bringing the tray to the bedside table where a lamp flickered with a low flame.

“You are late this eve,” Lord Kendryck said from the settee that flanked the massive stone fireplace.

“Your pardon, Milord,” she said softly. “It will not happen again.”

She kept her head down, bobbing a rushed curtsey to him before she backed away from his presence.

“Come here, wench,” he said in his thick brogue that never failed to make her shiver.

Swallowing the lump suddenly lodged in her throat, she went to him, keeping her eyes on the plush carpet at her feet. She stopped a few feet away, awaiting his pleasure, her heart hammering in her chest.

“Look at me.”

It was her greatest delight to look upon him and she slowly lifted her gaze, prolonging the moment until she saw his angelic face and the sensuous green eyes that held her spellbound each time they rested on her. Her heart ached just looking at him as

he lounged there on the settee. His dark hair fell in thick waves to the collar of his fine lawn shirt—left open halfway down his broad muscular chest with its sprinkling of dark curls. His long legs were encased in black trews that fit him like a second skin. He had discarded his boots and now one bare foot was braced on the edge of the settee cushion.

“My feet are cold,” he said in his husky voice. “I would have you warm them.”

“Aye, Milord,” she said breathlessly.

Nothing would have pleased her more than to touch him. She came forward and dropped to her knees before him, reaching out to take the foot stretched out toward her onto her lap. With gentle but firm pressure, she began to knead his flesh, looking down at the perfection of a male foot any sculptor would admire though she longed to gaze up into his beautiful eyes.

“What is your name again, wench?” he inquired, reaching out to take a snifter of brandy from the table by the settee.

“It is Angie, Milord,” she responded, daring a glance up at him, going still as a statue as his heated gaze shifted down her with speculation. She felt like a deer caught in lantern light, unable to move, to draw a decent breath.

“Angie,” he said then took a sip of the brandy. He lowered the snifter and rested its base upon his rock-hard belly, just where the dark hair streaked down beyond the waistband of his trews. “And are you married, wench?”

“Aye, Milord, I am,” she said.

He tilted his handsome head to one side. “So you are no virgin, lass?”

“Nay, Milord,” she said and blood rushed to her face as she forced her gazes from his and back to the task at hand. She massaged his toes tenderly, fascinated by how properly manicured were his toenails.

“Have you bairns?” he inquired, setting the snifter on the table again.

“I had two sons, Milord, but they be grown now,” she replied.

“Can you have more?”

It was a strange question and she slowly lifted her head, locking eyes with him despite the instinct that warned her not to be so careless or unmannerly.

“Nay, Milord, I cannot. I am too old now,” she said so quietly she was not sure he had heard her.

“So you would not bear a child were a man to bid you to his bed for a night of comfort?”

“C ... comfort, Milord?” she echoed and a strange gripping took hold of the lower part of her belly.

He pulled his foot from her light grasp, lowered his other foot to the floor, and leaned forward. “Come closer, wench,” he ordered, spreading his knees wide.

She walked on her knees, dragging the hem of her skirt up so she could position herself between his legs. Her heart was racing so fast she thought she might pass out from the thunder of the beat pounding in her ears.

“Closer,” he said.

Angie pressed her body to the edge of the settee, feeling the span of his inner thighs touching her at the elbows.

“Put your hands on the tops of my legs,” he instructed.

She hesitated, for his hands rested on his knees and she had to reach up farther along his leg, her fingertips almost at the crease of his thigh. When he moved his hand so his palms grazed her forearms—running lightly up them, barely in contact with her skin—she had to bite her lip to keep from moaning from his touch.

“You have very soft skin for a servant,” he said and turned his hands so the backs of his fingers trailed up the inside of her forearm from wrist to elbow. He willed her to meet his gaze. “Are you a witch, then, tempting me to stray?”

Angie’s eyes widened. Such things were forbidden to speak of and she could be hauled before the magistrate, turned over to the Tribunal, tortured and—worse still—burned at the stake for heresy.

“Nay, Milord!” she said, her lower lip trembling. “I am but ...”

“Shush,” he said and his fingers closed around her hands. He held her wide-eyed, fearful stare. “Are you right handed or left, little witchling?”

“R ... right,” she managed to answer.

He lifted her right hand from his leg and held it up, staring down at her work-roughened palm. “I would have you touch me,” he whispered and carried her hand to the juncture of his legs and laid it there on the hard mound that tugged at his trews. He molded her palm over that thick bulge. “Touch me. Make me feel.”

Outside the sleet peppered the window glass and the wind skirled in the eaves. The flames in the fireplace leapt and crackled, the wood popped and fiery cinders snaked their way up the cobblestone chimney, lending the comfortable scent of burning wood to the sandalwood and myrrh.

A veritable prisoner in his own fortress since the king had sent word that the laird was not allowed to leave Silvarn Keep under penalty of arrest, Lord Kendryck often walked the battlements late of an evening, staring to the horizon and the freedom he had lost. Not allowed visitors, he was a lost soul wandering from room to room, loneliness eating away at what was left of his ravaged soul. Only the nightly posset brewed for him helped him to sleep, to gain some manner of ease in this living hell into which he’d been thrust.

“My lady-wife hates me,” he said of his wife who had taken herself from Silvarn months before rather than suffer the same imprisonment as her husband. “She would see me hanged at Barrowmore if she had her way.” He caressed Angie’s hand over his hard erection. “She wishes to be free of me.”

Angie’s heart went out to the brave warrior who had led the rebels to victory at Derryn Cross over the brutal king only to fall victim to his own wife’s treachery teamed with that of his half-brother Stephen. If not for his noble birth, the laird of Silvarn would have met his fate in the summer.

“Ease me, Sweeting,” he asked and released her hand, letting his own fall to his sides. “I beg you, ease me.”

As she looked up at him she saw tears in the great warrior’s green eyes and it struck her to the core. She massaged the steel of his shaft but wanted more than just a taste of his hard body.

“Let me ease you as a lover would, Milord,” she said boldly and took her hand from him. She got to her feet, letting her shawl cascade from her shoulders to the carpet.

She put her hand to the ties of her chemise and tugged them apart, letting the cotton fall over her breasts to bare her to his fevered gaze.

She saw him sweep out his tongue to lick his upper lip, curling it downward over the full bottom lip before his lips parted to reveal the stark whiteness of his straight teeth as he took breath through his mouth. His chest rose and fell in a faster rhythm and she saw the pulse beating at the hollow of his throat—a sight that made heat gather between her legs.

He laid his head along the back of the settee and watched her as she unhooked her skirt and let it pool around her bare legs. There were no fine stockings, no coarse wool to keep her limbs warm in the harsh Northlands winter and only the threadbare drawers to hide her womanly assets from his avid view.

Angie untied the tapes of her drawers and let them slide down her legs, stepping out of them so she was naked before him, ashamed of her plump body with its birthing marks and slight pouches of fat.

But he didn't seem to notice her body was not curvaceous like that of his lady-wife or the many lovers it was rumored he had known in his thirty-odd years. His gaze was locked on the triangle of dark hair that curled at the apex of her thighs and when he leaned forward to draw her to him, to place his cheek against her fleshy belly, his arms curling around her, she threaded her fingers through his dark curls and held him to her.

"I need you this night," he whispered, his warm breath fanning across her belly. She could feel one strong hand cupping her right buttock as he held her to him and shuddered with delight at his touch.

"As I need you, Milord," she replied.

He got to his feet—his body sliding upward against hers, his clothing dragging against her naked flesh—and he bent his knees to sweep a hand under her legs, while the other stayed at her back and he lifted her as though she weighed no more than a small child, hefting her high against his chest as he carried her toward his bed. The muscles in his arms bunched and flexed and she laid her head on his broad shoulder.

As gently as a feather floating upon the wind he lay her down on the soft mattress and slid his arms from under her. Never releasing her gaze from his own hot hold, he tugged the shirt from his trews and pulled it over his head to bare his wide chest to her view. It was but a moment before the remainder of his clothing was gone and he was placing a muscular knee upon the mattress, weighing it down as he arched his other leg over her body to ensnare her beneath him.

Angie stared up at his perfect features—the dark hair, the sensual mouth, the startlingly beautiful eyes, and the breadth of his splendidly honed shoulders—before dropping slowly to the jutting awareness of his cock.

"Put your hand to him, wench," he asked, straddling her, his knees wide, his arms with their bulging biceps hanging loosely at his sides. "Let him know he is wanted."

Her hand shook as she reached for him, wrapping her fingers around the velvety steel that pulsed with life and warmth and eagerness to know more of her. She stroked him gently and put her other hand to his sac to cup him in her palm. She saw his eyes close. His head fall back, and his thick hair falling past his shoulders as he knelt there. His lips were parted and as she worked his flesh—tugging gently, running her fingers up

and down his hard length, molding him, caressing him, kneading his balls, she heard him groan low in his throat and it was a sound that made her hotter than the fires of hell to which she would, no doubt, be sent for this adulterous interlude.

He put his hands on her arms and circled her wrists within his fingers, holding her as she was plying his aching flesh. When he could take no more of her tender torture, he pulled her hands gently from him and spread her arms wide and leaned toward her, pinioning her hands to either side of her head. His long, lean body slithered down hers and his knees pushed hers apart, settling himself between her legs as he slanted his mouth across hers and took her in that manner.

His mouth tasted of brandy and his scent was all male, purely intoxicating and it worked its dark magic into her womb and through her loins to settle in her bud to make it throb with want and need and a lust so pure it pulsed. She longed to wrap her arms around him but he held her hands captive as he tongued her mouth in a way Angie had never known. He probed her, lapped at the edges of her mouth. He flicked his tongue over her lips then he thrust deep, withdrew, thrust against and ground his mouth against hers as though they were copulating in that fashion.

Though she had lain with her husband of thirty-four years many times, she had never known such sweet delight as she found in the arms of Lord Kendryck. He was an expert in the art of seduction, a master in the skills of lovemaking. He wove a tight web around her body and around her heart and held her to him without the aid of chains or ropes. She knew she would forever be linked to this beautiful man, her heart having been handed into his keeping.

He pulled his lips from hers and rained kissed down her cheeks, beneath her chin, down her neck and across her ear, nibbling at the earlobe until she was squirming under him. He moved lower still to lick at the hollow of her throat then down her chest and around the dark spiral of her nipple.

“Milord!” she moaned, for such ecstasy would surely kill her.

His tongue was moist and hot as it flicked over her nipple a moment before he drew the bud into his mouth and suckled her as a babe would at its nursing. He slid across to the other breast and did the same, tasting each in turn over and over again until it seemed he had his fill before he went lower yet to taste the indentation of her belly.

She lifted her head and followed his progress and when he stared at her belly with a deep frown upon his face, she asked what troubled him.

“These marks,” he said. “What caused such scarring, wench?”

“They are stretch marks, Milord,” she said, ashamed of the ghastly stripes that crisscrossed her abdomen.

He lowered his lips to one such scar. “Did they hurt you?”

“Nay, Milord,” she said. “ ‘T’ was merely the babes growing inside me that brought them about.”

He kissed the scars over and over again as though his lips could erase the brutal signs and heal her, then he moved up her again until his cock was poised at the apex of her thighs.

“I would taste you but not all women like that,” he said.

She blinked. “Taste me, Milord?” she questioned, not knowing what he meant.

Had it been his intention to take a bite out of her?

“Your honey, wench,” he said and released her left wrist to run his hand down her arm, her side, her hips only to slide it across her and between her legs. “The honey that seeps from your sheath.”

Angie’s face burned red and she turned her head away.

“Nay, wench,” he said, reaching up to cup her chin. “ ‘Tis a wondrous thing between a man and his woman. I would know your taste if you would allow it.”

Though embarrassment stained her cheeks, she nodded hesitantly, not sure what it was she was agreeing to but thrilling to the look of pleasure that lit his green eyes. As he moved down her again—releasing her other wrist as well so he could put his hands to the damp bush at her thighs and part the hair—she gasped for he took her into his mouth and her hips arched up from the mattress of their own accord.

“Milord!” she cried out and she buried her hand in his thick curls.

She heard him laugh, felt his hot breath along the folds of her sex and then he was doing such wondrous, delightful, surely wicked things to her that all she could do was grip his hair and hang on lest she fly clear off the bed and out the window into the heavens.

Of their own accord, her knees crooked and she wrapped her legs around his shoulders, his hands going under her hips to lift her higher for his feasting. His mouth was moving over her, his tongue licking at her folds, stabbing gently into her channel and his teeth grazing her bud until she was panting with need, her head whipping back and forth on the pillow, her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

She felt him pull away from her and lifted her head to complain, to whimper but when she saw the light of desire burning in his green gaze she bit her lip.

He moved up her again and put a hand to his stiff shaft, nudging her legs farther apart as he positioned himself at her entrance. Her legs were quivering as she held them in the air that way—clear of his hips until he slid smoothly and firmly into her cunt.

“Ah,” she heard him sigh and he went as deep as his steely rod would allow, filling her to the brim, completing her as she’d never been complete before.

And when he began to move within, easing out, pushing in, increasing his speed, increasing the depth, thrusting harder and swiveling his hips so his cock twisted a bit inside her, she wrapped her legs around his waist and clamped onto him harder.

“Aye, wench,” he said. “That is what I want. That is what I need! Tighter. Tighter! Hurt me if you like!”

She squeezed him as he bucked atop her and pummeled her expertly with his fleshy sword. He thrust and she parried, arching to meet him as he strove to elicit from her pleasure such as she’d never known.

His cock was large and long and thick and it stretched her almost to the point of pain and when he seated himself as far inside her as he could go, she grunted with the delicious force of it. Her hands were still in his hair, her legs at his waist and when the first spiral of release began undulating through her, she cried out and increased her grip on his lower body even more.

“Aye!” she heard him shout and he poured into her as the spasms of delight took hold of her and carried her to a place she knew only in her dreams.

“I love you, Rory!” she whispered. “I love you”

* * * *

Angie woke with the bedclothes soaked with her sweat and her pillow clasped tightly between her aching thighs. She was breathing heavily and knew a moment of such devastating loss that it brought tears to her eyes.

In her dreams she could have him. In her dreams he was there to take her as she longed to be taken, and it was in her dreams that Angela Evans knew the only true sexual satisfaction she had known in many years.

Chapter Two

Angela fumbled the key to Rory's apartment out of her purse, nervous at seeing him again the next morning, still unnerved and aching from the dream she'd had of him, still unable to believe she would be working in close proximity to a man for whom women all over the world lusted. It was too good to be true and she had pinched herself several times already as she rode uptown in the cab, her meager belongings encompassing six suitcases and a few boxes that would be arriving by messenger later in the day.

Leaving her things in the lobby under the watchful eye of the doorman, she took the private elevator up to the loft, her stomach doing nervous little flips, hands shaking, palms sweating. The elevator doors opened and she stood staring down the short hallway at the door to his apartment, swallowing hard as she forced one foot ahead of the other to leave the cage. With the key firmly in hand, she only made two misses at putting it in the slot then the lock disengaged and she opened the door, half expecting the smell of sandalwood and myrrh to flood over her.

He'd left the vertical blinds open on the wide sweep of industrial size windows that ran along the north of the loft. She suspected the glass had been changed to privacy panes to keep people from looking in. The apartment was filled with the gray wash of the day, for clouds still lurked on the horizon and rain threatened.

Setting down the one bag she'd brought up with her, she glanced at the opened door to what she suspected was his bedroom. The room was dark and as she listened closely, she heard the rumble of snoring echoing forth and that put a smile on her face.

"Heavy breathing, huh?" she said to herself as she went on into the kitchen area of the open space.

Working quietly, she set a pot of coffee to brewing and began looking through the cupboards, finding where everything was, taking out plates, mugs, silverware, and cookware as silently as she could.

It was the cough that alerted her that he was awake. She'd heard such morning coughs from her father who had been a heavy smoker and she glanced toward Rory's bedroom and froze.

He had obviously thrown the drapes aside in the room, for she could see clearly all the way to the massive Spanish armoire in front of which he was standing. Her lips parted and she couldn't have moved had her life depended on it. Her mouth went dry for a moment and then flooded with saliva. When he turned his head and looked at her, her eyes widened, jerking up from the object of her attention to his grinning face.

"Are you staring at my naked bum, Angie?" he asked her.

Indeed she had been, she thought as color flamed in her cheeks and she spun around, swallowing hard as she reached into the pantry. She knew she'd not get the image of his smooth, broad back and lean hips and that killer ass out of her head for the rest of her life. With his long legs standing braced wide apart as he opened the armoire door, his butt cheeks flexing, his back muscles stretching, his scrumptious nudity had rocked her to her very foundations.

She heard him behind her and glanced around, her face still hot. He was wearing a

pair of faded jeans he'd left unbuttoned at the waist as he padded up to the peninsula of the bar area.

"You were, weren't you?" he said, hooking a leg over a bar stool and sitting down, leaning his forearms on the bar top. He grinned like a little boy. "You were staring at my bare ass."

"If I'd had a camera, I could have become a very wealthy woman selling pictures of it to the tabloids," she said as she rummaged through the bags of groceries. He'd told her not to bother putting them away the evening before when the market delivery boy had shown up while they ate supper. The only things he'd allowed her to put away had been the perishables.

He propped his chin on the heel of his hand. "So what did you think of it? My bare ass, I mean? Its world class, ain't it?"

Her lips quirked. "I believe my exact thought was that you could bounce a quarter off it," she replied, deciding he was in a good mood, something the agency had warned her was not usually the case with actors and actresses the first thing in the morning.

His eyes lit up and he came to attention like a puppy will when its master produces a rubber ball. "Wanna try?" he asked eagerly. "I can shuck off me jeans and we can"

"I'll take a rain check," she countered.

Shoulders slumping, he sighed. "You're no fun."

"How do you like your coffee?" she asked.

"Brewed," he responded.

She sighed. "Sugar, cream?"

"Nope, just black."

"What about your eggs?"

"I like them cooked," he replied.

She wouldn't let that pass, just raised an eyebrow, and looked at him.

"Oh, you meant *how* do I want them cooked?" he queried. He shrugged.

"Scrambled with a bit of salt and pepper."

"Do you like grits?" She walked out of the kitchen and to the bag she'd brought with her.

He frowned as he twisted around on the bar stool, watching her as she lifted the bag to a chair and unlatched it, reaching in for a box of what apparently was grits along with a small glass jar of something else.

"I've never eaten any. What do they taste like?" His frown deepened. "Are they good for you?"

"Good *to* you," she corrected and proceeded to pour a portion of the grits into a microwaveable measuring cup.

"I'll try anything once," he said, propping his chin in his hand once again. He watched every move she made.

"Bacon or spicy patty sausage?" she inquired as she stood with the fridge door opened. "Which do you prefer?"

"Don't know her but Kevin and I've played ball together," he answered. "If she's real spicy, let's have Patty. I'm game."

Angela hung her head. "You are absolutely hopeless," she told him. "Make yourself useful and do the toast."

"How do you do toast?" he asked as he slid off the stool. "Do you just wrap it around your dangly and ..."

"Enough!" she laughed. "I can't take so much irreverence this early in the morning!"

He surprised her by coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her and nuzzling her neck. "Stand aside, wench," he said, "and let me at the butter. Can't do toast properly without slathering her little backside with butter and getting her all oiled up, you know."

She moved aside, slipping easily out of his arms, her entire body tingling from the contact of his bare chest. She shook her head as he chuckled at her like the mischievous little boy she was beginning to understand he liked to pretend to be.

"You're lucky you didn't go to work for Mike Gibson," he told her as he took slices of bread and popped them into the four-slot toaster. "He likes to play practical jokes on people. Once Saran-wrapped a girl's toilet seat shut." He fetched a butter knife and a plate for the toast. "He's particularly fond of plastic dog shit."

She let that pass though she felt him eyeing her, no doubt gauging her response. The timer on the microwave went off, letting her know the grits were cooked. She had sliced four patties of sausage and it was sizzling in the pan as she cracked eggs into a bowl and added a bit of half and half.

"Damn me, if that don't smell eatable," he said of the sausage. The first of the toast popped up and he began slathering it with butter.

"Trust me," she said, flipping the sausage. "You'll like it." She asked him how much toast he was going to make since he'd put four more slices in the toaster.

"I like me toast," he said then tucked his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment and she knew he was about to say something off-color. "I should say I like doing me toast. Getting it all hot and buttered."

Sausage out of the pan, she poured the eggs in and began whisking them, drawing his immediate attention.

"You're good at that, wench," he said. "And you're making me mouth water."

He'd been doing that to her all morning, she thought as she took the skillet off the fire. "Toast ready?" she asked.

"Aye," he said. "And dripping with cream as a properly done piece of ass ... ah, toast should be."

Ignoring that deliberate attempt to get a rise out of her, she brought the food to the counter. "Okay, here's the proper way to eat a good southern breakfast," she said.

He hiked himself up on the stool again to watch her.

"First, you ladle a blob of grits onto your plate."

"That doesn't sound good," he said, pretending to gag. "I'm not altogether sure I want a blob of anything on me plate."

She spooned scrambled egg on top of the grits. "Now you mix them together."

"Whatever the hell for?" he asked. "I like me food separate on me plate, wench!"

"They're all going in the same place and coming out the same place," she told

him. "What are you complaining about?"

He threaded his fingers together and pursed his lips as though put out with her remark.

"Then you cut up the patty sausage and mix it into the grits and eggs.

"Egads," he groaned.

"Next, you smear the Mayhaw jelly"

"The whathaw jelly?" he countered as she uncapped the small jar she'd taken from her bag.

"Mayhaw," she replied. "It grows in bogs down south."

"So does Swamp Thing," he said. "I'm not eating that! I might turn green or some other vile color."

"Stop being a baby." She extended a piece of the pale melon-colored jelly toward him. "Here, try it."

He gave the concoction a pained look then opened his mouth obediently and took a bite of the toast. His eyebrows shot up. He chewed silently for a second then he grinned broadly.

"Now that is good Mayhaw jelly," he pronounced.

He dove into the grits-eggs-sausage mixture with gusto, shoveling it into his mouth like he hadn't eaten in days, rolling his eyes at the taste, reaching out to bang his empty coffee cup on the counter, enjoying his meal too much to carry on his usual teasing. Before he'd finished, he'd consumed the entire small jar of jelly.

"I'll have to call my friend in Georgia and have her send me up some more," she said when he asked if she had another jar.

"A case of it," he stated emphatically. "No, make that two cases."

She shook her head at him. It was a good thing the man had a personal trainer and worked out three times a week to work off all the food he managed to down in a day's time.

"So," she asked as she began clearing away their breakfast dishes, "did you sleep well last night?"

"No, as a matter of fact I didn't," he said. He stared at her with a curious expression on his handsome face. "I dreamed about *stuff* all night. How 'bout you? Did you sleep good?"

Angela didn't want to ask what kind of stuff he'd dreamed about for she was afraid he'd tell her. "Not really." She shrugged. "Guess I was just nervous about my new job."

He straightened up. "By the way, where are your things?"

"Down in the lobby," she said. "I didn't want to wake you up dragging them in."

"We'll go get 'em, then," he said. "I'll help you unpack so I can go through your unmentionables and sniff 'em."

She groaned.

"Well, I like sniffing women's unmentionables," he said. "They stuff them into their drawers with sachets and all that."

"I don't," she said. "Mine smell like fabric softener."

"Humpf," he said. "We'll have to work on that, wench. How can I rummage

through your drawers when you're out and all I get is a whiff of Downey for me effort? Where's the fun in that?"

"You stay out of my drawers," she said then groaned again as she realized she'd given him an opening he was sure to pounce on.

And he did.

"There are millions of women who'd love to have me in their drawers," he said. He puffed out his chest. "Believe me when I tell you that you should have seen the front of me whilst you were ogling me bare rump. What's in front is a lot more"

"Stop it before I take this cast iron frying pan and smack you in the head with it," she warned, hefting the heavy skillet.

He grinned devilishly and wagged his brows at her. "Which head?"

* * * *

The rest of the morning he'd helped her settle in and when she asked what his other plans for the day were, he told her he had scripts he needed to look through.

"Boring shit for the most part," he explained. "But my agent is insisting." He chewed on his lip for a moment. "Would you like to read them, too, and give me your opinion?"

She glanced around the loft. It needed a thorough cleaning although everything was neat and tidy. She had already come to the conclusion that there were certain areas in his life that were important to him. He liked order. He liked to talk, and laugh, and he intended she take all her meals with him. She suspected he didn't like eating alone.

"That can wait until tomorrow," he said as though reading her mind. "Spend today laying with me on the bear rug and reading really bad scripts. Okay?"

She nodded. "What would you like for lunch? I'll fix it first and then we can recline decadently on the rug and read."

"Samitch would do fine," he said as he went in search of the scripts. "Salami on rye with dill pickles and chips and some of that tea you said you could make."

She'd already steeped a pan of tea on the stove and made the simple syrup to go with it, instructing him to squeeze lemons to keep him from under foot. Another thing she'd learned about him was that he was constantly near her, watching her, keeping up a running conversation that more times than not was aimed at making her blush or sputter with laughter.

He was already stretched out on the rug with pillows propped behind his head, script in hand, when she brought their lunch tray over. He glanced over at her, frowned when he saw the old-fashioned glasses on the tray. "What is that?"

"That's the bloody Mary mix from yesterday," she replied.

"No booze?"

"None. Just good stuff in it."

"Yeah," he said with a secret smile. "But what is that green shit floating in it?"

"Green beans, asparagus, green onions, and wedges of the dill pickles you ordered with your samitch."

He stared at the red liquid suspiciously. "And you expect me to put that in me mouth and do what with it?"

"You chew food, you drink liquid. Aye, boss, that I do." She stuck her fork in his

glass and brought up a spear of asparagus, extending it toward him with the palm of her other hand under the dripping vegetable to keep the liquid from his bare chest.

He reluctantly took a bite, chewed silently, swallowed, and then obediently opened his mouth again.

Angela grinned. "See? I won't steer you wrong." She pierced a green bean and fed it to him.

"You'll do, wench," he said and reclined there opening and closing his mouth, chewing quietly until he'd finished the vegetables in the glass then drank the liquid. He closed his eyes as though he'd tasted heaven. "What do you add to it?"

"Lime juice, celery salt, Worcestershire, a few splashes of Tabasco, and a bit of the liquid from the dill pickles." She smiled. "Like it?"

"No," he said, taking the sandwich she handed him. "I love it and I want yours, too."

"Can't have it," she said.

He gave her a wicked look. "Wanna bet?"

"Eat your samitch," she ordered. "I'll make you some more later."

He cocked one shoulder and took a large bite of the salami on rye, chewing thoughtfully. "This is really gonna work, wench," he said and took another bite. "Me and you. It's really gonna work."

She hoped so for she hadn't smiled and laughed so much in months—maybe years. Rory Keith was good for her and she suspected she was good for him.

* * * *

"Tripe!" he exclaimed and threw the script across the room. "God-awful, fucking tripe!"

"I used to like fried tripe," she said as she looked up from the western she was reading.

Rory swiveled his head on the pillows he had insisted she lay on beside him. "Are you kidding me?"

She shook her head. "No, I really did when I was a child until I found out what it was." She lowered the script to her lap. "Used to like sardines and fried fish roe, too. Now, just thinking I gobbled that stuff up like . . ."

"Stop saying stuff, wench," he said, wincing. "You've no idea what that word does to me coming out of your mouth."

She stared at him a moment then lifted the script up and started reading again. "Do you eat haggis?" she asked.

"Damned straight I do," he replied. "It's good."

"Well, don't expect me to try it. I'm not into sheep."

"Me, neither," he said and chuckled. "Other animals, maybe, but definitely not sheep."

She rolled her eyes at him.

"What else did you eat when you were a kid that you don't eat now?" he asked.

She lowered the script again and stared into the fireplace with longing. "Salt fish," she said, sighing deeply. "Lord, I would give anything for a good piece of salt fish."

"What is salt fish?" he inquired. "What kind of fish was it?"

“I don’t know,” she answered. “But it was so good.”

“The Vikings did salt cod,” he said. “That’s damned good.”

She shrugged and picked up the script. “You should do this one,” she said.

He took off the glasses she hadn’t known he needed to read when she first met him and rubbed his eyes. “What’s it about?”

“A gunfighter who’s out to avenge his little brother’s murder.”

“Is there sex?” he asked. “It’s in me contract there must be wild, monkey sex.”

“He kidnaps the daughter of the villain and has his way with her,” she said on a long sigh. “I’ll probably dream about that scene tonight.”

“Does she fight him during the seduction?”

“At first but then she gives in to the inevitable.”

“Probably liked the way he slung his gun,” he declared with a chuckle. He was staring down at her bare feet, seemingly fascinated by the cherry red toe polish.

“What evil thing are you thinking now, boss man?” she asked, seeing where his attention had gone.

He sat up, scooted down on the rug, and lifted her foot. “I wanna do this”

Angela just stared at him as he took her big toe between his thumb and index finger.

“This little piggy went to market,” he said and she laughed as he moved to the next toe. “This little piggy stayed home. This little piggy had roast beef. This little piggy had none.” He gently took her little toe and caressed it. “This little piggy got broken.” He looked up at her. “How’d that happen?”

“A brutal encounter with the leg of one of our kitchen chairs,” she replied.

“Ouch,” he said and stroked her toe softly. “I broke my big toe once and it hurt like a motherfucker.”

“How’d you do that?”

“Stubbed it on the stairs.” He slid his hand to her bare ankle and rubbed her flesh absently. “Ever notice how hard it is to walk with a broken big toe? It throws your balance off, you know?”

She watched him scoot back up until he was sitting beside her. He surprised her by taking the script out of her hand, turning around so he could lay his cheek in her lap, the back of his head pressed against her belly.

“What are you doing?” she asked quietly.

“Gonna take a nappie now, Granny,” he said. He was lying on his side and he slid the arm on which he was resting under her crooked knees and curled his fingers around the lower part of her raised thigh and closed his eyes.

Angela looked down at him as he lay there with his knees drawn up, his bare feet crossed at the ankle and of their own volition, her fingers spiked through his soft hair to massage his scalp.

“Umm,” he groaned and his other arm went over her thigh, the fingers of each hand threading together to hold her captive in his embrace.

This man was doing things to her that was driving deep into her heart. A part of him was childlike and trusting and she was beginning to realize he was a very lonely, needy man. As she smoothed his thick hair back from a perfectly sculpted forehead, she

noticed a small scar on his right temple and traced it with a fingertip.

“Snotty older brother,” he mumbled. “Tonka truck thrown at high velocity. Collision with six-year old flesh that bled like a stuck pig. Two stitches for little brother and very satisfying ass-whipping for older.”

She ran her free hand to his shoulder and just held him, stroking his hair until she heard the steady, even breathing that told her he was asleep.

* * * *

Sloan Harper watched the rolling cloud of dust thrown up by the stagecoach as it rumbled over the open plains. His gloved hands were crossed over the saddle horn as he flexed his thighs to hold in check the high-spirited roan stallion upon which he sat. He moved his right hand to the deadly six-shooter strapped to his thigh and caressed the pearl handle. A brutal smile tugged at his lightly whiskered cheeks, then he pulled on the reins, turning his mount to maneuver it down the small rise and to the place he'd picked to waylay the stage.

With his black Stetson shielding his steely eyes from the blistering sun, he gently kicked the horse into a slow gallop to gain the ambush point before the Wells Fargo coach. His black duster flapped in the wind behind his legs and his silver spurs flashed as he kept the heels of his dusty boots down. He rode easily, his mind on his objective, a muscle jumping in his sun-darkened jaw. When he reached his destination, he reined in the stallion and threw a long leg over the horse's back and slid to the ground, his spurs jingling as he landed. Tying the horse to a piece of deadwood, he pulled his rifle from its leather scabbard, worked the lever and stepped out onto the roadway over which the coach would soon be traveling, knowing the vehicle would have to slow significantly to take the sharp turn that skirted the boulders of the rocky canyon. With the rifle up and pointed, legs spread wide in a deadly stance, he waited for the rumbling, jangling, squeaking stage to approach. As soon as the two men appeared sitting high on the wooden seats, he fired a warning shot and cocked the rifle again.

“Whoa!” he heard the driver shout as he began sawing on the reins to stop the coach's horse, saw the man riding shotgun start to lift his weapon. Harper fired again and the shotgun went flying out of the other man's hands which then immediately went up in the air in surrender.

“Throw down your side arms!” Harper ordered, his rifle trained on the driver, and the two men promptly obeyed. “Now, climb down.”

Getting to the ground, the two men held their hands above their head as they stepped away from the coach at Harper's command. “On the ground,” he told them and with alacrity the driver and his companion dropped to the dirt.

Keeping an eye on the driver and the other man, Harper walked to the stage's door and flung the door open. “Out!” he barked, stepping back.

The first one out of the stage was a peddler, his jowls wobbling as he hurried off to one side, his hands up. The only other occupant remained in the coach for a moment longer, then an older woman stepped down the dusty steps, her reticule clutched tightly in her trembling hand. She gave Harper a worried look then joined the peddler.

“You Dalton's daughter?” Harper demanded, sweeping an insulting glance down her portly frame.

The woman nodded, face pale, lips trembling.

“You,” Harper snapped, switching his gaze to the peddler. “Back inside.”

The overweight man hesitated. “What of the lady?” he asked.

“You didn’t help her out,” Harper replied. “You aren’t helping her back in.” The rifle lifted a bit. “Now, get!”

Scrambling to climb back inside the coach, the peddler spared his traveling companion an apologetic look before settling down on the seat.

“You two,” Harper called out to the driver and his assistant. “Back on the stage.”

The two men pushed up from the ground. The driver cast the woman a worried look. “What about the lady? We can’t just leave her here.”

“You can and you will,” Harper told them.

“W ... what are you gonna do with her?” the driver asked.

Harper didn’t answer. His eyes narrowed dangerously, his finger tensed on the rifle’s trigger, and the driver made haste to climb back up to his seat, his companion scurrying up the other side. He stood where he was until the stage was set into motion and the horses were picking up speed before he shifted his stony glower to the woman.

“Come here,” he ordered.

She lifted her chin, finding a bit of backbone as she stood there shaking from head to toe. “What are your intentions, sir?” she asked, her voice trembling almost as violently as her body.

A cold, hateful smile pulled Harper’s taut lips. He was staring at her with such hatred, such venom the air around them was snapping with tension.

“Don’t make me tell you twice, woman,” he said in that lethally low voice that bore just a trace of an accent.

Her ample bosom heaving with fright, she shuffled toward him, the hem of her expensive gown dragging in the sand. Knuckles white as she gripped her reticule, she couldn’t take her eyes from his shadowed face beneath the brim of the Stetson, for she’d seen the ravage of a wavering scar that bisected his lean right jaw. When she was within striking range, he shot out a hand and gripped her pudgy arm, yanking her with him as he started behind the boulder from which he’d appeared.

“You’re hurting me,” she protested as he tugged her along.

“Good,” he snapped.

She spied his horse but saw no other means of travel. She knew she’d be riding with him and horses frightened her. Her stomach did a funny little plummet and she dug in her heels, making him stagger.

Harper twisted around, his lips skinned back from his teeth. “Woman, you don’t want to piss me off.” He jerked her arm and she nearly lost her balance as she stumbled behind him.

“I don’t ride,” she said. “I ...”

He didn’t give her a chance to finish for he spun her around, grabbed her around the waist, and hoisted her into the saddle, half-laughing when she fumbled to grip the saddle horn for dear life, striving not to tumble off the other side of the saddle.

“Oh, Lord!” she whispered. “Oh, Lord!”

She was perched there with her skirt hiked up to her knees, her prim little white

stockings looking odd against the darkness of the saddle's fender. She was a good foot shorter than him and her feet didn't reach the stirrups and when he swung up behind her, lacing her into the fortress of his arms, he had to nudge her legs out of the way to thrust his boots into the stirrups.

"How the hell much do you weigh, woman?" he snorted as he leaned forward to take the reins.

He felt her stiffen in his arms and sit forward so her back wasn't touching his chest, but when he kicked his mount into motion, she was thrown against him, and when he tightened his hold, she had no choice but to rest against him. The rocking motion of the horse brought her rump into contact with the spread V of his legs and he wasn't expecting the reaction his body gave to the situation.

Dalton's old maid daughter, the rancher's most treasured possession, the apple of her father's eye, he thought as he let the stallion run full-out back the way the stage had come, backtracking, leading anyone who might try to track him far off course. He had plans for this woman and those plans would take them deep across the border and into the Mexican hills where a posse would never find them.

Her hair was flying free of the ridiculous little bonnet that she was trying desperately to keep atop her head. He got tired of the loose ribbons slashing at his chin and pushed her hand aside to snatch off the stupid thing, letting it flutter behind them.

"Oh!" he heard her gasp and she actually had the nerve to punch him on the forearm in protest. He chuckled, not in the least perturbed by her little show of bravery. When she did it again, he made up his mind to show her who was in charge and bent his left arm so it snaked around her midriff, just under her breasts, and he jerked her against him, fingers digging into her ribcage, and lowered his head so his lips were at her ear.

"Hit me again and I'll strip you naked and you'll ride that way all the way to Mexico," he warned, his warm breath harsh in her ear, but he gained the satisfaction of having her go as still as death in his arms. He didn't know if it was his threat or her finding out where he was taking her that made her turn motionless.

They rode for over an hour--cutting back and forth across the Rio Grande several times before he finally took the trail he had planned. It was hot as hell with the wind having died down to a heavy press of air against them but in the distance lightning forked and dark clouds were building.

He stopped at a little village for food and water, warning her if she spoke, if she called attention to herself, he'd make her pay for it in ways she might find humiliating. She took him at his word and stood meekly by the horse, waiting for him to finish his business. When he tossed her casually upon his horse once more, she winced.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" he growled, stuffing the food into his saddlebags.

"My posterior is bruised from the riding and I have a stitch in my right side that makes it hard for me to draw a decent breath," she said, surprising him.

"We'll be at the cabin in an hour or so," he mumbled and swung up behind her once more.

"An hour?" she said and groaned. "I don't think I can take another hour of riding."

“Would you prefer I sling you over the saddle like a sack of salt and let you ride like that?” he countered.

“I’d rather you drop dead of a heart attack and the horse stomp you to a bloody mush,” she replied as they left the sanctuary of the poor little village.

“Won’t happen,” he told her. He moved so his cock pressed into her backside.

“Stop that!” she said, leaning forward.

Harper grinned down at her, for he planned to do far more than just push his clothed rod against her. He intended to send her back to her father a little worse for wear and if luck was allowed, with a reminder of the man who had disgraced his precious offspring.

The rain overtook them about ten miles from the cabin he’d provisioned for them. Lightning spewed forth dangerously and he had no choice but to find shelter in a large cave, hoping there weren’t already denizens lurking inside it even more dangerous than he knew himself to be. Dismounting, he led his horse into the semi-darkness and found a place to tether him as thunder rumbled, spooking the beast.

Soaked to the skin, her gown plastered to her chubby body, her hair a sodden mess streaking down her back and into her face, the woman had stumbled along in Harper’s wake as rain pelted the entrance to the cave, coming down in solid sheets with the wind blowing the rain sideways. She looked a sorry sight and one that shouldn’t have aroused anything in him other than disgust but as she stood there trembling with her arms wrapped around her while he gathered sticks and brush to make a fire to warm them, he found his gaze straying to her more than it should have.

He tossed their saddlebags down

“Sit down,” he said, nudging his chin toward a flat rock that had obviously been used for just that purpose at some point in time. The cave was dry with a good draft coming through the opening which told him there was a crevice somewhere farther back in the rocky expanse that allowed for drawing in fresh air. There were also the remnants of older fires that bespoke humans had used the cave for shelter in the past.

She perched on the edge of the rock and looked around her, arming a wet strand of her fine hair back from her damp face. “My father will pay a good price for you to return me to him,” she said.

He was hunkered down in profile to her and didn’t reply as flames leapt in the center of the brush he had managed to fire to life. He fanned it with his hat until it was going good and a low light lit the dark walls.

“Did you hear me, Mister ...?”

“I heard you,” he muttered then got to his feet to fetch the saddlebags.

He saw her looking longingly at the fire and told her to move closer to dry her clothing. He didn’t have to make the offer twice for she came to squat down with her hands out to the heat.

“That is why you abducted me, isn’t it?” she asked, turning her head to watch him as he doled out the food he’d purchased at the little cantina into the two tin plates he’d fished out of his things. When he didn’t answer her, she looked back at the fire, staring into the flames. She flinched when he stuck the plate of beans and rice and tamales in front of her.

“It’s cold but it’ll have to do,” he said as he sat down across from her, his legs crossed tailor style as he began scooping the food into his mouth, chewing methodically, his eyes never leaving her face.

She acted as though she’d never had such plain, peasant fare before but seemed to enjoy it as she ate gracefully, chewing delicately, and occasionally taking a sip of the canteen he had placed between them.

At one point, he caught her staring intently at him and realized her attention was on the vicious scar that ran down his right cheek from temple to chin. His mouth twitched. “Compliments of your father,” he informed her.

She flinched but didn’t deny the charge, didn’t accuse him of lying. No doubt she knew her father well enough to know he was a brutal man not above marking another man’s face in such a cruel way.

“Stop looking at me!” he snapped and when her eyes lowered as though he’d struck her, he felt like a real bastard and that irritated the hell out of him.

In a voice he barely heard, she asked him point blank if he was going to kill her. When he did not answer, she timidly raised her gaze and looked him in the eye. “Are you?” she whispered.

He leaned toward her, his face hateful, his eyes narrowed. “No, bitch,” he replied. “I’m going to fuck you.”

The moment his words registered, he saw her eyes flare and she dropped the plate in her lap, sprang to her feet, and ran for the entrance to the cave as fast as her pudgy legs could carry her. She was just barely out in the pouring rain when he grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. Though she lashed out at him with her fists--hitting him harder than he would have thought possible for a woman her size, getting in one solid slap to his face--and kicking him with her hard little shoes, he bent down, planted his hard shoulder in her midsection and hoisted her from the ground with his arm restraining her legs, ignoring her screams and flailing fists as she pounded at his back, scratching him with her nails as she dug at the small of his back.

He carried her to a flat section of the cave and dropped to his knee, letting her fall backward onto the loose rocks. Before she could kick out at him, he was shoving the hem of her gown up, wedging himself between her thighs, pinning her wrists above her head with one strong hand and he used his other hand to rip her bodice and chemise downward, exposing her breasts. He reached down to tear her drawers from her lower body, his palm brushing across her wiry curls.

“No!” she shrieked and fought him like a wildcat, though her strength was nothing compared to his. He easily restrained her, grunting at her struggling but his intent clear in the hard glint of his green eyes.

He fumbled at the closure of his pants, striving to free his cock, intending to take her with as much savage force as he could but the erection that throbbed, that pushed with need to be free, that ached to thrust inside her was doing something to her he had not expected. She was panting but her eyes were glazed and she kept sweeping her tongue over her lips, her body quivering as he pressed his weight atop her, holding her down, his hand trapped between his crotch and hers.

He looked down into her face and as one brutal roll of thunder shook the cave

walls around them and lightning flared beyond the entrance, he saw hunger and need building in her. Her lush breasts heaved upward with each harsh breath, but it seemed to him they pressed toward him, offered themselves for his tasting and he lowered his head, drawing on hard little bud deep into his mouth.

“No,” she whispered, but it seemed to him not so much a protest of what he was doing to her as what her own body was doing to her.

Suckling her, sweeping his hot tongue over her straining nipple, nibbling gently, he realized he was drawing from her a response neither could have imagined and his hold on her wrists eased.

They stared deeply into one another’s eyes and when the hand between their bodies moved, he saw her gaze waver, her eyelids flicker. He knew in that moment she was surrendering to him.

“I’m a virgin,” she told him.

He nodded for he had suspected as much. It was part of the reason he’d chosen to exact his revenge on Dalton in this way.

Freeing his cock, he swept it down the folds of her sex, allowing her to feel the moistness that clung to the aching tip. She drew in a shuddering breath but no longer fought him.

He released her wrists and she lay there for a moment with her arms still crossed over her head but then she hesitantly lifted her hand toward him. Though he shied away slightly from the contact, she ran her fingers through his hair.

“Don’t hurt me,” she asked, holding his gaze.

His attention went to her lips and before he knew what he was doing, he had lowered his head to claim her mouth, thrusting his tongue gently inside as she tightened her grip on his hair. He tasted her and lost himself in the sweet honey of her mouth.

Though he tried not to, he brought pain to her when he eased his cock inside her tight sheath. He filled her, stretched her slowly but when he broke through the fragile membrane, she gasped and tears filled her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he heard himself say and it was the first time in years he had apologized to anyone.

Slowly and as gently as he could he began to move inside her until he felt her body reacting to the depth and rhythm of his thrusts. He was pushing them firmly toward that wondrous place where bliss and lust and desire dwelt. The aching in his groin was intensifying and her juices were flowing as he pumped faster into her sleek warmth. Then

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* * * *

The phone jarred Rory awake and he gasped, sitting up so quickly Angela did not have time to let go of her hold on his hair and he yelped, slapping a hand to his head. He stared at her as his heart raced, his body tensed and primed for a release he was but a hair’s breadth from enjoying.

“I’m sorry. Were you having a nightmare?” she asked, her gentle eyes searching his pale face.

The phone rang again and he cursed, stumbling to his feet, trying desperately to hide the thick erection that pushed painfully at his pants.

“Make that fucking phone stop ringing!” he ordered as he all but ran into his bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

Chapter Three

Bobby Thompson switched his attention from Rory's sullen face to the new housekeeper's pleasant smile. He didn't know what he'd done to annoy Rory but the man was glaring at him as though Bobby had kicked the helpless pup the actor kept insisting he was going to adopt.

"I've been working for him for what--five years now, Rory?" Bobby asked, but the man in question didn't reply.

Rory was sitting on the sofa with his knees drawn up and enclosed within the perimeter of his arms. It was a body position that clearly shouted withdrawal.

Angela turned her head toward Rory, giving him a curious look. "Boss man?" she asked softly and when he glanced at her, she saw his face soften.

"Don't call him that or he'll be unbearable to live with," Bobby warned.

"Fuck you and the horse you rode in on," Rory mumbled.

"Horse?" Bobby echoed.

"I've got to start supper," Angela told them and got up from the club chair where she'd been sitting. She smiled at Bobby. "Will you be staying ...?"

"He will not," Rory interrupted.

"I will not," Bobby said and apparently decided he'd worn out his welcome. "I just wanted to drop by and introduce myself since our lord and master didn't see fit to call me to let me know he'd hired you."

"Wasn't any of your fucking business what I did," Rory informed him and got up off the sofa and went into his room.

Bobby stared after him then looked to Angela. "Did I interrupt something between you two when I called?" he inquired.

"He was asleep," she said. "I think he was having a nightmare and it's stayed with him."

Bobby walked into the kitchen area as she began taking pots and pans out to begin supper. "He has a lot of nightmares, actually. It's good he'll have someone here with him at night. I sometimes think he spends too much time alone."

"Goodbye, Bob!" Rory called from the bedroom.

Angela shook her head. "Celtic temperament," she pronounced.

Bobby lowered his voice. "Just keep him from the booze."

"I read he had a problem," she said softly.

"He's an alcoholic, Angie," Bobby stressed. "One drink and he falls off the wagon for days on end. If you find a bottle, get rid of it and he'll be right as rain." He headed for the door. "Call me if you need me," he yelled to Rory.

When Rory's assistant was gone, Rory came out of the bedroom and plunked himself down on a bar stool, his arms folding defensively over his chest as though he expected Angela to scold him for his behavior.

"I was a prick, huh?" he finally said after about fifteen minutes of silence in which she went about her work without speaking to him.

"A royal one," she agreed as she breaded pork chops then dropped them into sizzling oil.

“He fucked up my dream,” he defended himself. “And it was just getting good.” He took a paper napkin from the holder on the counter and began rolling it into a tube. “I was about to get some stuff.”

She glanced at him as she added a tablespoon of cornstarch to a cup of cold water and whisked it. “By stuff, I am beginning to think you mean nookie.”

“Prime nookie,” he agreed. “Harper was about to nail Dalton’s daughter.”

Her brow furrowed. “Who is Harper?”

“The gunslinger from Wayward Wind,” he replied.

“Oh, him. That’s gonna be a good movie. If you don’t contract for it, it would be great for Conor Farrell.”

Rory’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “That fucking Mick couldn’t act his way out of a wet paper bag with a long tear in it!” he declared. He began unfolding the napkin and tearing it into long strips. “I’ll do it.” He sniffed. “I want to do it.”

“You know who would be great as Clarinda?” she asked as she poured the water from a pot of boiled potatoes.

He looked up. “Who?”

“Clarinda, Dalton’s daughter,” she replied. “Kathy Bates would be perfect for that role.”

He shrugged. “I suppose.” He ran his gaze over her as she added a stick of oleo to the pot of potatoes.

Hers was a full figure with lush breasts that pushed at the fabric of the cotton blouse she wore over her black twill pants. It was what she had told him was her preferred uniform unless he wanted the black dress with white apron of most professional housekeepers. Although her hips were a bit wide, her belly rounded and her arms thick, he didn’t find that unattractive. His gaze roamed over her double chin and he thought it adorable. He wanted to tug at it playfully.

“What are you staring at?” she asked as she stirred milk into the melted oleo atop the potatoes.

“How much do you weigh?” he questioned.

Her eyes opened very wide. “I’m not going to tell you that and you’ve no business even asking me!”

“You were a bit heavy when I lifted you up on the horse,” he said. “We’ll need to work on that. I don’t need a hernia.”

Her eyebrows arched up into her bangs. “What?”

“I was just about to rock your world when Thompson called,” he said, scooting off the stool. “Piss poor timing on his part, lemme tell you.”

She stood there with her mouth hanging open as he strolled into the living area and flipped on the plasma TV, stretching out on the sofa and propping his bare feet on the cocktail table. The milk almost boiled over before she remembered it and quickly removed it from the heat. It took her a good minute or two before she had her hammering heart under control well enough to add the cornstarch to the mixture to thicken it.

Supper ready, she came in to ask him where he wanted to eat.

“Right here,” he said.

She asked if he wanted to fix his own plate and he told her to do it for him. He

was engrossed in the pay TV series Cottonwood and when she brought his plate of pork chops, creamed potatoes, sugar snap peas and roll to him, he patted the seat beside him.

“You sit here,” he said, staring at the screen.

After bringing him a glass of tea, she brought her own food in and sat down beside him.

“Albert Sweargen is a hoot,” Rory exclaimed. “Ian really brings the character to life, doesn’t he?”

“I’ve always been a fan of Mr. Shane’s,” she replied as she cut her pork chop.

“You’ll meet him when we go to London next month,” Rory told her.

They were silent as the western played out before them. Finally as the credits began rolling, she looked at him.

“You’ve got to stop teasing me so strongly,” she said.

He paused with a chunk of potato at his mouth. “Why?”

“Pretending to be dreaming I was Clarinda”

“I wasn’t pretending,” he said. “I really was dreaming I was about to have sex with you and was damned mad I got interrupted.”

She sighed. “You poor, delusional man. You need to get out more.”

He stuck the potato in his mouth. “Do you find it odd that I would dream of making love to you?”

“Perhaps Angela Jolly or ...”

“Ah, no,” he said and she remembered he had once done a movie with the beautiful star.

“Well, now I know how bad your nightmares can be,” she said. “No wonder you looked so upset when you woke up. Having me beneath you must have been terrifying.”

“Who said you were beneath me, wench?” he asked. “You was straddling me dangly and riding like the wind with your sweet tits bobbing”

“Oh, shut up!” she said and propelled herself off the sofa. She stomped into the kitchen and began cleaning. She didn’t expect him to follow her and he didn’t.

Rory finished eating and brought his empty plate to her. She was at the sink washing the pot the potatoes had cooked in and ignored him when he came to stand beside her, his hip against the counter.

“I really did dream of you,” he said, his feet crossed at the ankles, arms folded over his chest.

“That’s not funny,” she said, scrubbing angrily at the pot.

“It wasn’t meant to be. Why do you find it so hard to believe?” he asked.

She paused with the heels of her hands on the edge of the sink and turned her face toward him. “Look at me,” she said. “Do I look like a woman who would inspire lustful dreams in a man like you?”

His forehead creased. “What’s that supposed to mean? What is a man like me?”

She snorted. “*Community Magazine’s Most Beautiful*”

“That’s all a bunch of ripe shite,” he said, giving the word the Gaelic pronunciation with a sneer.

“*Period Magazine’s*”

“Another pile of it,” he stated.

“*First Magazine* said”

“Fuck me,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“*Applause, US, TV Listings ...*”

“What have you been doing?” he demanded with a laugh. “Stalking me, wench?”

“I dream about you!” she said, staring him in the eye, no doubt shocking him from the look he gave her. “I’ve dreamed about you making love to me for years. I’ve seen all your movies and have copies of nearly all of them. I have all your records and I have a scrapbook of your pictures and....”

He had her in his arms before she could finish and his tongue was parting her lips, slipping inside even as her soapy hands pushed ineffectively at his muscular biceps. She strained to get free of him, but he would not allow it. He turned so she was against the counter and he was leaning into her, pressing his body against hers, one hand at the back of her head to hold her mouth still for his taking, his arm around her back. He wedged one leg between hers, the hardness of him forming along her belly.

Angela’s head was spinning and her body was on fire with a need that scared her. She pushed against him, but he wouldn’t release her and the longer his potent kiss continued, the more her knees weakened and her belly clenched. Her fists were doubled against his shoulders but there was no give, no lessening of his hold. If anything, his embrace tightened around her and the bulge between his legs stabbed into her. With one last, frantic shove, she managed to break free of him, stumbling sideways to get away from him, a trembling hand to her lips, her face as white as a sheet.

“What the hell were you doing?” she questioned, tears clouding her vision.

Rory shook his head as though to clear it of whatever strange emotion had reached out to ensnare him. He was as shocked at his actions as she appeared to be and just stood there looking at her, breathing heavily, trying desperately to get his desire under control. He couldn’t move as she fled, running to her room and shutting the door loudly, the sound of her lock clicking making him flinch.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” he swore, unable to do anything but stare at her door, his blood pounding in his ears.

Angela was shaking so badly all she could do was slump down on her bed and tremble. Her lips were swollen from his passionate kiss and her body alive with a desire so rampant she knew what she’d have to do in the shower before she could ever hope to sleep that night. That he had toyed with her, she could not forgive and the tears suddenly became a torrent of sobs that shook her to her core and she fell to the mattress, keening in her misery.

The gentle knock at her door was like a hot blade to her heart and his low voice as he begged her to open the portal hurt even more.

“Angela, please,” he said, his brogue even more pronounced as he spoke softly.

“Open the door and let me apologize.”

“Go away!” she threw at him.

Rory ran the palm of his hand over the surface of the door. “Please, Angie. I don’t know what the hell came over me. I’m sorry.”

She’d known it was too good to be true but her admiration for his talent, her awe of his stunning male beauty, had blinded her. Men like him made fun of women like her,

yet she had fallen into his trap so easily. She had thought they could be friends--not just employer and employee. She should have known better and it had not only cost her her pride but any chance of having the exciting life she'd pictured at the side of a man like Rory Keith.

"Angela, let me in," he asked.

She did not respond and after awhile, he seemed to give up. She sat up on the bed, swiping at her swollen eyes as the tears finally subsided and felt her heart breaking. For the longest time she sat there going over and over the choices she had and realizing they were few.

She'd given up her apartment to move in with him and what little money she had in the bank wouldn't be enough to put down on a deposit for a new place. She'd only worked for him for one day and that wouldn't be enough to get her very far. She had no choice but to stay if he'd allow it and work long enough to save up the funds to get another place. She doubted he'd give her a good reference after the fool she'd made of herself tonight.

"You idiot," she called herself. "Why did you tell him all that?"

After an hour of self-recrimination, she got up and trudged unhappily into the bathroom, her memory of his kiss still enflaming her body, dredging up needs that had not been filled in years. Cranking the water up, she stripped off her clothing that had his smell on them and threw them across the room. She climbed into a shower too cold and stinging but needing the punishment for having been so stupid.

* * * *

Rory stood at the window and stared out at the lights of New York. The apartment was quiet and still and lonelier than he could ever remember it being. He could feel Angela down the hall, but she might as well have been a thousand miles away.

Not used to feeling as he did at that moment, he turned away from the window and lay down on the sofa. Why had he grabbed her like that, he wondered? That was so out of character for him, so alien, yet it had felt right as he held her, as he kissed her. Emotions he hadn't experienced in years had welled up inside him and he had wanted her as he hadn't wanted another woman for as long as he could remember. He'd been going through the motions for months, taking what beautiful women so willingly offered, but never gaining anything more than the moment's satisfaction from their silken arms and collagen-injected lips, the release of his sperm into bodies perfectly sculpted by the finest plastic surgeons in the world. He had entangled his limbs with their perfumed ones and called it fulfillment but it had been far from that. Every liaison had been nothing more than physical release. They had signified nothing and meant even less.

But with Angela, he had felt more than desire, more than passion. He had felt contentment, a coming to the place he'd been striving to find and now he had wrecked that fragile beginning, crushed it.

He groaned and turned to his side, his face to the back of the sofa, his knees drawn up. He was miserable and hated himself for what he'd done. No wonder the poor woman wouldn't talk to him, wouldn't allow him to explain, wanted nothing more to do with him.

Then he did what he'd been doing since university when his life wasn't going the

way he'd wanted it to. He got up and went in search of the bottle he had hidden, the only one Bobby hadn't found and poured down the drain when Rory had been in rehab. With the vodka in hand, he sat down on the bear skin rug, unscrewed the cap with a flick of his thumb, and brought the bottle to his lips.

* * * *

Hours of tossing and turning finally ejected Angela from her bed and she went to the door, an ear to the wood, listening. It was very late and she was fairly sure Rory had gone to bed hours before, but she cautiously opened the door and peeked out. The living area was dark, only the striated bands of sky-glow coming in through the long bank of windows.

She ventured out, her mouth dry, needing something ice-cold to wash away the thirst. One look at his bedroom door to find it closed made her heave a relieved sigh yet she was quiet as she padded barefoot into the kitchen and quietly pulled the refrigerator door open. Taking out a cold can of Pepsi, she closed the door and started back to her room.

"I'm a fucking prick."

Angela squealed and dropped the can. It rolled along the parquet floor as her heart thumped madly in her chest.

"Course, I've always been a fucking prick."

It was the slurring of his words that made her hesitate continuing on to her room. She tried to find him in the living room, but the fire had gone out in the fireplace and wherever he was, he was in the darker shadows. She took a step or two into the room.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"In hell, wench," he mumbled. "In the twentieth circle of fucking hell."

She nearly stumbled over him as her foot struck the bottle and sent it skittering across the floor--no doubt to join the can of soda wherever it had gone.

"There is no twentieth circle," she said.

"There is in my world," he told her. "I'm fuckult."

She knew that mean he was drunk and when she fumbled for the switch on the light beside the club chair, he wrapped a hand around her ankle.

"Don't," he said. "Don't turn it on."

His hand was cold around her flesh, but his touch didn't last long. He removed his hand with a mumbled apology.

"How much did you drink?" she asked as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and she could see him sitting there on the floor.

"The whole goddamned bottle," he stated. "And another one I found in the planter in the powder room."

She scrunched her eyes shut. "Why?" she queried.

"I shouldn't have slobbered all over you, wench," he said. "Not every woman wants me to slobber all over them."

She sat there for thirty minutes and listened to him apologizing. Half the time what he said made little or no sense to her for his thoughts were scattered, his words tumbling out in that thick brogue that she could barely understand. At one point she thought he might be crying but then he laughed hatefully, called himself a few choice

names then grew silent.

“You need to get to bed,” she said.

“Can’t fucking walk,” he said. “Tried and can’t get me legs to hold me up and I’m pretty sure I’ve pissed me britches a time or two.”

She thought so, too, for the smell was ripe surrounding him.

“Well, you can’t stay on the floor all night,” she said.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” he quipped. “Once spent the night on a loading dock.” He chuckled. “Woke up with a fucking miserable head cold.”

He was too heavy for her to lift and she doubted if she could brace him steadily enough to get him into the shower. The only thing to do was to call Bobby, his assistant, but when she asked for Bobby’s number, Rory clammed up, refusing to tell her.

“Rory, you”

“You’re thinking of leaving me,” he accused. “Because of what I did.”

She didn’t deny it.

“Everybody leaves me sooner or later,” he muttered.

Angela heard true misery in his soft voice and her heart went out to him. “Just give me Bobby’s number,” she said.

He was quiet for a bit then told her he’d make a deal with her. If she promised not to leave him, if she would forgive him for what he’d done, he’d give her Bobby’s number.

She heaved a long sigh. “All right. I’ll stay. Give me the number.”

“You swear?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t leave me?”

“No, Rory,” she said. “I won’t leave you.”

He gave her the number and after she’d called Bobby, woke the poor man up, she made a second call to the AA sponsor whose number Bobby gave her.

“He’ll get there before I am,” Bobby had told her.

* * * *

Long after Bobby and Lou Timmerlane, the AA sponsor, had gotten Rory into the shower and then into bed, Angela sat in the chair in her bedroom and listened to the low talk coming from the room down the hall. Though she couldn’t hear what was being said, she knew the men were trying to decide whether or not to return Rory to rehab. Apparently the decision was made that it wasn’t necessary and Timmerlane left. Bobby remained behind to spend the remainder of the night on the sofa.

* * * *

“What set him off, do you know?” Bobby asked her the next morning as he sat with her at the breakfast table over coffee.

She looked down into her cup. “He kissed me and I reacted badly.”

Bobby sat back in his chair. “He kissed you?”

She nodded. Her hands were wrapped around her coffee cup as though she were trying to keep them warm.

“I thought you said I didn’t interrupt anything yesterday,” Bobby accused.

She lifted her gaze to his. “You didn’t. He told me he had been dreaming that he

was making love to me and got pissed when you called and woke him up. I thought he was playing a very cruel joke by saying such a thing and I called him on it. I don't like being the butt of someone's childish spite."

Bobby stared at her. "Rory doesn't do things like that," he stated.

"Ah, come on!" she snapped. "You don't think he was putting me on?"

"If there's one thing I know about Rory John Keith," Bobby said, "it's that he never lies. That man wouldn't know how to. He might be a fallen away Catholic, but he's still an altar boy at heart."

"And you think a man like him would be dreaming about someone like me?" she demanded.

"If he told he was, you can take it to the bank, sister," Bobby insisted.

"Then why did he kiss me?"

"How the hell should I know?" Bobby countered. He swept his gaze over her. "You're not a bad looking woman and maybe he liked the way your lips looked. Maybe you were giving off some kind of pheromone or he sensed a need in you. The man has a Mother Theresa complex sometimes when it comes to helping people. It was the way he was brought up."

"Or maybe I goaded him into it," she said in a strained voice.

Bobby held her stare until Angela looked away, not quite as sure she understood the situation as she had been.

"You know, he hasn't had a date in six months," Bobby finally said. "Maybe he was just horny." He took a sip of coffee. "I dream I'm doing it with Reese Witherspoon on a nightly basis."

They both looked up as Rory came shambling past them into the kitchen. His curly hair was tousled, his t-shirt damp, and he looked terrible. He wouldn't look at either of them but went to the coffee maker and poured himself a mug. Angela noticed the way his hand shook as he brought the scalding hot brew to his lips.

"You need to go to as many meetings as you can find today, Rory," Bobby said.

Rory nodded. He was standing with his back to them, slowly sipping the coffee.

"You do that shit again and we're going to take another trip to Arizona. You hear me?"

Again Rory nodded. His shoulders were slumped and he was standing there with one bare foot resting on the other like a child being scolded. It brought out the mothering instinct in Angela and she got up and went to him, putting a hesitant hand to his back.

"Do you want me to fix you something to eat?" she asked.

"No," he said softly.

"You need some aspirin or something like that?"

He turned his head and when she saw the moisture in his eyes, she felt her heart twist in her chest.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know why I"

"Let's just forget it," she said and forced a smile she didn't feel to her lips.

"I'm gonna call Lou and find out where the meetings are," Bobby announced, getting up from the table. "He'll come by and pick you up."

Rory was looking into Angela's eyes. "Will you go with me?" he asked.

She didn't hesitate for she had heard the pleading in his voice, could see it in his wounded eyes. "If you want me to."

"I do."

* * * *

There were nine other people in the room when Rory stood up. He was pale, his handsome face drawn and tight.

"I'm Rory," he said. He looked at Angela, took courage from her gentle smile, and lifted his chin. "And I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi Rory," the others responded.

Chapter Four

“We’ve known each other since second grade,” Angela told him. “I haven’t seen her in a few years, not since my divorce.”

They were discussing the old friend who was flying into New York later that day to see Angela.

“You never talk about your marriage or your divorce,” Rory said. They were sitting on the balcony with the warm spring sun chasing away the blahs of the winter.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she said.

She had been working for him since September and May was a week away. In that length of time she’d traveled to London, Madrid, Rome, Athens, and Los Angeles with him. She’d spent the last two weeks in LA while rehearsals for his next movie got underway. They’d come back to New York for Easter and would be there for another week or so before the production of *Wayward Wind* began in New Mexico. She’d met his parents, his five brothers, and two of his three sisters, and had been welcomed into their friendly clan as though she were one of the family. She and Bobby had become very close.

As for the relationship between her and Rory . . .

They still joked with one another but the humor was more subdued and lacked the intense sexual innuendoes for which Rory had such an affinity. He was a perfect gentleman around her at all times while still maintaining an easy going camaraderie that made her feel at ease. She had finagled him into eating healthier than he had intended and kept a close watch to make sure no liquor lurked in any of his dwellings.

“What was he like?”

Angela looked up from the crossword puzzle she was doing. “Who?”

“Your ex,” he said. He was sitting with the soles of his bare feet planted on the balcony rail, shirt off, jeans unbuttoned at the waist, hair shorn almost to the scalp for the opening scenes of the new western.

He didn’t think she was going to answer. It seemed to him she guarded her personal life religiously, but he was curious about the man who had hurt her so badly she had given up on dating.

“I met him when I was in high school,” she said. “He had graduated from college and was working for my father’s construction company as one of the bookkeepers.” She filled in an answer on the puzzle as she spoke. “Daddy adored him. That should have been a red flag waving in my face, but I was too caught up in Dickie’s good looks and sophistication.”

“Dickie?” he repeated. “His name was Dickie?”

“Richard,” she supplied. “Richard Headly.”

“Dickhead,” he stated and when her lips pursed with laughter, he said it again.

“I don’t think anyone ever called him that but it’s an apt description,” she said.

“And you and Dickhead were married thirty-five years, had two sons, and then divorced.”

“That’s about it.”

“Why?”

She looked at him. "He traded me in for a newer model with more stylish features."

"And you went back to using your maiden name?"

"Yeppers," she said and filled in another answer on the page.

Rory looked across the way at the high-rises. "He hurt you."

"He hurt me," she agreed, "and I really don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Was he a good lover?"

She sighed so deeply her shoulders dropped. "No, Boss Man, he was not a good lover. Adequate at times, but if I enjoyed it, fine. If not, well, too bad. Maybe next time, babe."

"I'm an excellent lover," he stated, tapping the magazine lying in his lap.

"Generous of my time and sharing of my energy, completely giving and not content until my partner is thoroughly satisfied. I may well be the Energizer Bunny come to life."

"So I read," she said, not looking at him.

"Aye, well I never touched that conniving bimbo on or off the set," he said of the co-star he'd had in the mystery/thriller he'd made just before Angela came to work for him. "I ought to sue her wide-load ass for libel."

"So you didn't pull her into the back of your agent's car and bang her until her eyes crossed?" she inquired.

"Hardly," he said with a snort.

"Makes good copy, though," she commented. "And adds to your legend."

"I haven't slept with anyone other than you in over a year," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "You fell asleep in my lap once."

"Yeah and look where that got me," he said as he lowered his feet from the balcony rail. "Almost got me alone again."

She watched him go back inside the apartment and gave up on the crossword puzzle, tossing it to the chair he'd vacated before sliding her feet into her sandals and going inside to see what he was up to.

"Don't you be raiding that icebox, Keith," she said. "Lunch is almost ready."

He had the refrigerator door open and was just standing there looking in it.

"And shut the door. You're wasting electricity."

"Nag, nag, nag," he said but shut the door. "I'm hungry, Granny."

He'd taken to calling her that and it had become her nickname among his family and friends--except for Bobby who called her Warden.

She went to the stove and lifted the lid on the soup that was slowly bubbling away on the burner. "Sit down, then."

He hooked a leg over the stool and plopped down just as the phone rang. When Angela picked up the cell phone and saw who was calling, he watched her face turn hard.

"I'm gonna change my number," he grumbled.

"Keith residence," Angela said when she answered.

"He's not in at the moment. May I take a message?"

He propped his chin on the heel of his hand and stared at her.

"I'll see he gets the message, Miss LeVane."

Rory groaned and crinkled his nose, crossing his eyes as Angela glanced at him.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be sure to tell him. Goodbye.”

“She doesn’t give up, does she?” he asked in a disgusted tone when Angela hung up.

“If you didn’t want her calling you, you shouldn’t have given her your number,” Angela reminded him.

“I’m gonna change it.”

She ladled up a bowl of baked potato soup for him, sliced him some French bread, and then poured a large glass of sweetened tea.

“You’re not eating?” he asked.

“I’m going to the airport, remember?” she asked. “I’ll get something on the way.”

“Where’s she gonna be staying?” he asked before slurping his soup.

“At the Etesian,” she answered. “I probably won’t be back until late so you’re gonna have to make do with samiches for supper.”

“I may go out,” he said.

She knew he hated eating alone. “Call Bobby.”

“Don’t want to call Bobby,” he muttered.

“Then get out your little black book and call a nice female you can take out to supper,” she suggested.

“There aren’t any nice females in my little black book,” he told her. “They are all grasping, greedy starlets who want to be seen hanging on my arm, showing off their new veneers to the paparotten.”

“Then go online to Harmony.com and find yourself a compatible mate. Settle down, get married and have half a dozen little Keiths,” she responded as she headed for her room.

He made a face at her back then tore off a section of the bread and dropped it into the soup. “I found what I want,” he said under his breath. “But she doesn’t want me.”

“What did you say?” she called out.

“Nothing!” he grumbled.

Half an hour after Angela had left to pick up her friend from the airport Rory sat on the balcony and stewed as he listened to one of Angela’s CDs of Celtic music. He was at a loss to find anything he wanted to do and the thought of spending the day alone depressed him. Cursing when the phone rang, he ignored it, not wanting to talk to anyone except the one person who made him feel completely alive.

Shoving his hands behind his head, he threaded his fingers together and glared up at the ceiling of the balcony, tracing a crack that had appeared over the winter. He made a mental note to tell Angela about it so she could have someone come in and fix it.

“I wish someone could fix me,” he said and closed his eyes as he thought about the long conversation he’d had with his mom in London at Christmas.

* * * *

“She’s a very lovely girl, R.J.,” his mother said, using the name his family called him. “I can’t imagine why she’d not married.”

“She was,” he replied. “He left her.”

“Ah,” his mother said, nodding.

“What does that mean?”

"That explains the shadows in her eyes."

His mother was sitting in the car with him as he drove her to the market and they were quiet for a moment.

"I'm in love with her."

"Yes, I know," his mother responded.

He'd nearly driven off the side of the road, snapping his head toward his mother's calm face. "How do you know?"

"It explains the hunger in your eyes when you look at her, son."

"How do I make her see me as a man instead of one of her sons, Ma?" he asked later on that afternoon.

"Her sons are about your age?"

"Actually," he said, his cheeks warm. "One of them is older than me."

"Oh," his mother drawled. "That makes it a bit tougher, now, doesn't it?"

"Would you date a man younger than you if you and Dad weren't together?" he asked.

His mother--who had always guided him and his siblings with a firm but gentle and understanding hand--thought about it for a moment.

"If I loved him, I don't believe it would be an issue, R.J., but different women look at the situation differently. She might not be able to get past the age difference."

"There are a lot of women married to younger men," he reminded her. "There is a twelve year difference in age between Sue Sarand and Tom Robinson, sixteen years between Demi Morris and Ash Kitchen, there were nineteen years between Fran Annison and Calude Fiennes and twenty-one years between Barbara Hertz and Nave Andrewson. That's the exact same age difference between me and Angie. What's wrong with May-December marriages?"

"You're talking about marriage, is it?" his mother asked.

He'd pulled the car off the side of the road and sat there with his hands gripping the wheel. "I love her. Age doesn't matter"

"Have you noticed she and I could pass for sisters?" his mother inquired and when he'd looked at her with his eyes wide, she'd smiled. "They say a man tends to marry a woman who reminds him of his mum. You could do much worse, R.J."

He'd buried his face in his hands. "What am I going to do?"

His mother had put a comforting hand to his shoulder. "What's meant for you will not pass you by. Give her time. Maybe she'll come to know what you already do."

* * * *

Thinking back on that exchange, Rory knew nothing had really changed for Angela. She still viewed him as she would a son, although he often caught her looking at him with what he knew was desire. He had not forgotten her wild admission on that fateful day he'd gone off the deep end and drank himself into her bad graces. She forgave him his lapse but he knew--at Bobby's instigation--she was watching him like a veritable hawk. Another such lapse and he felt sure she'd be gone in a heartbeat. She had no idea it was she who was keeping him from touching the bottle again for fear of losing her.

"Fuck," he said and got up to go inside.

He wandered around the living area, changed the DVD to something less

melancholy, poked around in the refrigerator, looked at the clock at least a dozen times and scowled when time seemed to be trickling by instead of ticking away as it should. He went back out on the balcony and watched the sun set then must have dozed for awhile for he woke to noises inside the apartment and got up to investigate.

Angela was moving around in her bedroom and he sauntered down the short hallway, stopped at the opened door and leaned against the jamb.

“Did you have a good time with your friend?” he asked, happy she was home.

“She’s dying.”

Nothing she could have said could have surprised him more. He pushed away from the jamb and went into the room as she sat down on the edge of her bed and stared at the floor. “What’s wrong with her?” he asked softly.

“Ovarian cancer,” she said. “In the advance stages.”

He winced, knowing that wasn’t good. “How long?”

“She was already dying from it when they diagnosed it,” she told him and reached up to wipe at a tear falling slowly down her cheek. “Two months, they say. Three if she’s lucky.”

He moved to the bed and sat down beside her, reached out to take her hand. He held it on his thigh. “I’m sorry, love,” he said.

“When we were growing up, we talked about taking a trip by train from Halifax to Vancouver. Neither of us has ever been to Canada and we thought it would be a wonderful trip.”

He smiled. “I lived in Canada for awhile. It’s a beautiful country. I did a movie in Calgary.”

“She wants to go now,” she said. “She’s already bought the tickets for us. The train leaves May 2nd.”

“That’s nine days from today,” he said.

She turned to look at him. “I want to go, Rory.” Her eyes pleaded with him. “I need to do this for her. It may be the last chance she gets.”

“How long are you talking about?” he asked.

“The trip is seventeen days but she suggested we drive up along the eastern seaboard and see the six states between here and Halifax,” she said. “We’d leave as soon as we can rent a car tomorrow.”

“You’d be gone nearly a month,” he complained and felt her hand jerk in his. He was selfishly thinking of being without her and that irritated him. He could see the hurt gathering in her face that he would deny her.

“I’ve got vacation time coming, don’t I?” she asked. “I could”

“You don’t need vacation time,” he said, looking away from her. “If you want to go, you go.”

Her hand tensed in his. “You mean it?”

“Sure,” he said. “What kind of bastard would I be if I told you that you couldn’t go with a dying friend on such a special journey?”

She stunned him by turning and putting her free arm around him, hugging his neck tightly, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Thank you, Boss Man,” she said. “Thank you so much!”

He shrugged, wrapping his arm around her waist and holding her closer than he should have. "I'll waste away while you're gone so you'll probably come back to find nothing more than a shell of a man, but I guess I can do with losing a few inches 'round me middle."

"You're as buff as a body builder and you know it," she said and unhooked her hand from his and got up, going to her closet to start packing.

He felt bereft and she hadn't even left yet. Watching her as she pulled clothes from the rack and brought them over to lie beside him on the mattress, he noticed she wasn't smiling, that there was no obvious excitement in the way she was methodically removing clothes from the closet.

"I'll get the itinerary off the Internet and give it to you so you'll know where we are on any given day," she told him. "We plan on staying a full day in each of the states to see the sights."

"It won't take you an entire day in Rhode Island," he scoffed. "Maybe an hour or two."

She half-smiled at his remark. "We want to tour the state capitol buildings." She glanced at him. "Sharon loves architecture."

He nodded. "Don't forget I'll be in New Mexico most of while you're gone."

"And making a pig of yourself on salsa and guacamole," she declared.

"Not to mention fried plantains," he mumbled.

It didn't take her long to pack and when she had the bags at the front door, she cut through the kitchen to put on a pot of water to boil for the spaghetti she was serving him for supper. He was still sitting on her bed, his hands clenched between his thighs. She came to stand beside him, wrapping her arms around the thick column of the foot board column.

"I wish you could go with us," she said, surprising him.

"I wish I could, too," he said and when she reached out to run her fingers over his hair, he felt his heart begin to ache.

"I hated you having to chop off your hair," she said then trailed her fingers down his cheek.

"I'm going for the grunge look so it will be more realistic of a man just getting out of an old west federal prison," he replied of his upcoming movie role. "Short hair, no lice, I hear."

"And what is this? Did you forget to shave this morning?"

He scratched his cheek. "To tell the truth, I hate shaving. Most men do"

"Actually, I like it," she said and stroked his face gently before lowering her hand.

"Hey, you'll call me every night, okay?" he asked.

"Every night?" she queried, laughing.

"Every single night! I want to know where you are and how you are and what you did and what you're gonna do and where you're gonna go next."

She hesitated but at his puppy dog look she gave in. "All right. Every night."

"I'll miss you," he said, his eyes on hers.

She smiled softly. "I'll miss you, too, Boss Man."

He wanted to scream at her that he was more than her boss, more than her

employer. That he wanted to be far more to her than she was willing to allow, but she was already turning away, going back to the kitchen. He hung his head, his fists clenched down in his lap.

“I love you,” he whispered, then forced himself up and out of her room where her scent clung to the coverlet where he’d been sitting.

* * * *

The next evening in Hartford, Connecticut, in the hotel room she was sharing with her childhood friend Sharon Munson, Angela slipped between the cool sheets of the double bed and looked across at Sharon in the other double. Her friend had fallen asleep not soon after lying down right after supper and Angela had spent the remainder of the evening watching television in the lobby so as not to disturb Sharon.

It was close to midnight and Angela was finally tired, having driven the rental car that day—as she would every day of their New England side trip—and she had a slight headache. She’d taken two Migraine caplets before she’d gone up to the room and though she wished she could take a long, hot shower, she had foregone the pleasure.

“*You are going to bankrupt me with your water consumption, wench!*” Rory often teased her for the long showers she enjoyed. He’d laugh if he knew she’d not been allowed that guilty satisfaction tonight.

She hadn’t forgotten to call him, but he must have been in the shower, himself, for she only got his machine.

“I’m in Connecticut,” she told him. “In Hartford. We’ll be going to Rhode Island tomorrow where we’ll be spending an entire day!” She’d laughed. “Be good, Boss Man. Talk to you tomorrow night.”

Rory, she thought as she turned to her side and pictured him in her mind’s eye. He was such a handsome man--much too handsome for his own good. With one look he could reduce her to a mound of molten lust and she suspected he knew it, though he’d been careful since *The Night of the Mistake*, as Bobby had labeled it.

“*I’ll keep a close eye on him,*” Bobby had promised her. “*Go and take care of your friend. Don’t worry about the Scot.*”

She worried about Rory just the same. He’d been quieter than usual. She knew her being away bothered him, but she hoped Bobby would be there for him when Rory needed company. That he hated being alone so fervently concerned her. She wondered what had happened to him to make him feel so depressed when he was by himself. She was sure something had, but whenever she broached the subject with him, he either made a joke of it or wouldn’t answer at all, depending on the mood he had been before she asked.

Yawning, she turning over on her other side and plumped up the pillow, tucking her hand beneath it. She wondered what he was doing at that moment, if he was pissed at her that she hadn’t told him what hotel she was at and as sleep claimed her, she wondered if he was thinking of her.

* * * *

“I think of you every day I spend in that damned miserable jail,” he told her. His hands were tight on hers. “It’s the only thing that keeps me going night after night.”

She reached out to brush the hair back from his eyes. “You are innocent, my

darling," she said. "Somehow we'll prove that you are."

"You've believed in me when no one else has, Jenny," he said, bringing her hands to his lips. "I'll never forget that."

All around them was the hustle and bustle of the federal courthouse. Armed guards surrounded them so it was not the place to hold a reunion. The federal marshals had brought him there, his wrists restrained in handcuffs, for his sentencing.

"Let's move it, Jackson," the marshal snapped. "Get your hands off the broad."

Her lover stiffened. "She's not a broad, Marshall. She's a lady."

"Yeah, yeah," the lawman snapped. "Tell it to someone who cares. Stand back, lady. We ain't got all day."

The man in the rumpled tan suit and stained Fedora pushed her roughly aside as the two men to either side of her lover pulled him toward the courtroom.

Though she knew her lover wanted to pounce on the marshal for treating her so rudely, he could do nothing as they hustled him through the swinging doors. She followed quickly, her heart thundering in her ribcage.

The pop of flashbulbs lit the courtroom as Seannie Jackson, the man convicted of killing a guard during a brazen mid-town bank robbery, was ushered in. Reporters shouted questions at him, observers in the seats craned their necks to get a better look at the infamous Handsome Seannie as newspaper columnist Walter Wincette had labeled him. Women fanned themselves and called out to the good looking convict, squealing his name as though he were a movie star.

Her lover's lawyer was already at the defense table, shuffling papers, looking harried but determined. He cast her a worried look and motioned her to a seat right behind the rail that separated the defense table from the gallery. She pushed her way through the throng of reporters who were dogging Seannie's every step and wedged past several spectators to reach the seat the lawyer had reserved for her.

"Any word on what the judge might give him, Peterson?" a reporter yelled to Seannie's lawyer.

"They're gonna throw the book at him," someone spoke up. "He'll get life without the possibility of parole. Whatcha wanna bet?"

"I say they'll fry him. He'll get the chair!" another spectator declared.

She shivered at that hateful remark and she noticed that her lover did, as well, as the guards unshackled him before leading him to his lawyer's table.

"Don't worry, Maeve," Seannie's lawyer said, leaning over the rail. "There's not much chance of a death sentence." He patted her hand as she clutched her purse tightly to her chest.

Her lover smiled at her as he took his seat and she ached to reach over the rail and caress his shoulder. The suit they'd given him was stretched taut across that broad expanse and the trousers fit much too snugly to be comfortable. He seemed ill at ease as he sat there with his head down, listening to whatever his lawyer was telling him. She saw him chaffing his wrists and wondered if the lawmen had deliberately tightened the handcuffs to hurt him.

"All rise!"

The judge came into the courtroom and took the bench, his scowling face causing

immediate silence among those gathered. He settled his billowy black robe around his corpulent body and sat down, his beady, hawk like gaze surveying the spectators before settling on Seannie. She thought she saw the man's thin lips lift into a sneer and her hope began to fade.

"The defendant will rise," the judge pronounced.

Her lover and his lawyer got to their feet.

"Sean Patrick Jackson, you have been duly convicted of murder in the death of Lionel Kraft, a father of nine whom you shot down in cold blood on the morning of August 5th of this year while engaged in the robbing of the First National Bank of Lewiston. Twelve good men convicted you of this cowardly crime, and it is now left to me to pass sentence upon you."

She saw the judge narrow his eyes.

"Do you wish to make a statement before I hand down your sentence?"

Her lover stood straighter, his head up. "I am very sorry for what happened to Mr. Kraft, Your Honor, and I extend my sympathy to his wife and children, but it was not my gun that took his life. I am innocent of his death. As God is my witness, I did not fire my gun that day."

The judge nodded, his lips pursed.

"Sean Patrick Jackson, after much consideration and lengthy perusal of the facts gleaned from eye witnesses to the robbery, it is the decision of this court that you are to be remanded to the penitentiary at Broadmore where this court sentences you to death by electrocution ..."

Those gathered in the court erupted into a loud, harsh roar of sound that had most of the spectators on their feet. Some women appeared to faint, others wailed, their cries of lamentation filling the room.

She sat in her chair--stunned by the news, tears filling her eyes. Her lover turned and looked at her and she could see the desperation turning his green gaze dark with dread.

"I'm sorry," he said to her, but she did not, could not hear the words for all the noise in the courtroom. She only saw his lips move, instinctively knowing what he was saying.

Pandemonium reined in the room and the judge's gavel was pounding ferociously for order. Guards lined up at the rail to keep the spectators at bay. Two men in dark gray suits came out of nowhere and took her lover by the arms and pulled him away, his lawyer's shouts of denial drowned out by the bedlam roaring around him.

Someone took her by the arm and she looked up, staring into the stony glare of another dark suited man. His grip tightened. "Come with me," he ordered and jerked her in front of the two people who had been sitting to her right but who were shaking their fists and yelling, attempting to get past the guards.

Shoving people aside with no regard to whether he toppled them or not, the man pulled her along behind him--through the throng and out into the antechamber and along the corridor, ignoring her protests and not giving her the chance to break free. His grasp on her arm was painful, would surely leave a bruise, but she had no choice but to stumble behind him.

“Where are you taking me?” she yelled at him for there were crowds of people milling about, armed guards trying to keep them back.

Down the corridor and out through a nondescript door, down a twisting quartet of stairs and into a dark, tight hallway with exposed pipes running overhead and into a grimy basement smelling of kerosene, so dimly lit she could barely see.

“Please! Who are you? What’s happening?” she pleaded but the man ignored her, just kept dragging her in his wake until he shoved open a metal door and bright light that nearly blinded her.

There was a black car waiting with its engine running and the man rushed her toward it. Two men armed with machine guns were guarding the vehicle and at the entrance to the underground garage, more men were lined up with weapons across their chests. One of the men at the car moved forward and opened the back door and her escort practically shoved her inside, slamming the door before she could get up from the floorboard to which she’d fallen.

“Maeve!”

She looked up, stunned to see her lover sitting in the backseat. She barely had time to take the hand he offered her before the car shot into gear with a squeal of its tires and peeled out of the garage.

“Seannie, what’s happening?” she said as he pulled her up on the seat beside him.

Her lover put a hand to her cheek. “I’ll tell you all about it later,” he said, pulling her into his arms.

It was a mad rush through the city and into the outlying countryside. There was a car with armed men ahead of them and another riding shotgun behind. The convoy of vehicles crossed the northern border at just after two in the afternoon. He held her close to him the entire time, explaining how he was a federal agent and how he’d infiltrated the gang that had been taking down banks all along the eastern seaboard. He told her why he’d been set up to take the murder wrap, of the men he’d gotten close to in jail to learn all he could about the big boys, how he’d given information to the Bureau that would lead to the arrest and subsequent conviction of powerful underworld figures.

“You’ll hear it on the news tonight,” he said. “Sean Jackson was gunned down trying to escape custody on the way to Broadmore.” He squeezed her hand. “He was shot in the face by a shotgun blast. As far as the world knows, he’s history.”

Later that night, after their escorts had left them in a snug little cabin far in the North Country, thanking her lover for a job well done and wishing him and his lady well, the man the world had known as Handsome Seannie kissed her long and hard and pledged his love to her.

“I thought of you every day I was in that cell,” he told her while they lay in bed with the silence of the mountains surrounding them. “You were always with me. I couldn’t have made it without you, doll.”

“And I never gave up hope we’d be together again,” she confessed, her hands tender on his cheeks.

He made love to her then--slowly, sweetly, and with such tenderness it brought tears to her eyes. It wasn’t rushed. It wasn’t while looking over their shoulder for a bullet to find them. It was with all the time in the world and all the love in his heart.

His hands shook as he pushed down the bodice of the silk slip she'd worn to bed. "We'll have to make a trip to Windemere and get you a proper nightgown," he vowed. He laid his palm over her bare breast. "I dreamed of doing this."

She ran her fingers through his short hair and held his head to her as his lips closed around her aching nipple. His teeth grazed the tender flesh and he suckled her, drew upon her, and laved her with his warm tongue while he held her breast captive in his strong hand, kneading it gently. Against her thigh, his shaft grew hard and flexed, the tip moistly straining to have a taste of her, as well.

He shifted his attention to the breast closest to his broad chest and ran his hand down her belly and spiked his fingers through the wiry curls that grew at her thighs. His palm caressed her, his middle finger dipping amongst the curls to touch that sensitive pearl that brought a deep intake of breath into her lungs.

"Oh, Seannie," she whispered and he lifted his head, looking up into her eyes with such need, such wondrous intent that she wanted to cry.

"I love you with all my heart and all my soul, Maeveen," he told her and she caught just a hint of the brogue he'd worked so hard to vanquish. "Marry me."

Her heart did a funny little flip in her chest and her hands tightened in his hair. "Yes, Seannie. Yes!"

His smile was a million watts of pure sensuality as he lowered his head to kiss his way down her belly. He scooted down in the bed and nudged her thighs apart, taking her in his mouth to torture her with his tongue.

She arched her hips against him and he hooked his hands under her rump to lift her up to his sultry invasion. He worked her like an expert--sliding his tongue along her folds, thrusting it quickly and with heat into her cunt, suckling upon her clit--until she was writhing beneath him, aching for something more solid than his flashing tongue stabbing into her moistness.

"God, you taste so good," he breathed against her core and she held his head in a tight grip as he licked her from top to bottom and then up again.

"Seannie, please!" she begged him and felt the tip of his finger probing lightly at her entrance.

"This what you want, doll?" he asked and slowly pushed inside.

"Yes!" she cried out and wriggled against him, striving to bring him all the way into her channel. She heard him laugh wickedly and then felt another finger being inserted inside her. Her eyelids fluttered, her head whipped to and fro on the pillow.

Her lover was adept at what he did and as his fingers worked her, eliciting honeyed juices that coated his flesh so he might draw them out of her to lick away the sweetness, she drew up her knees and allowed her legs to splay apart, giving him all the room and encouragement he needed.

"Love me, Seannie," she demanded, her voice husky. "I want to feel you on me and in me and"

She got no further for he withdrew his fingers and slid over her, putting a hand to his cock to guide it firmly inside her, pushing deep, going all the way in, filling her to the brim, stretching her, pushing against her very womb.

He laughed again as her legs came around his waist and she pulled him closer to

her, seating his rod as far inside her as it would go. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, his hair, and his lips moved to her breast as he drew upon her flesh, rocking his shaft in and out of her velvety warmth. She squeezed her eyes shut to better experience the pleasure he was giving her.

Lightning forked through her loins to singe her and she cried out as the first wave of spasms rippled through her lower body and pulsed around her lover's cock.

"Maeve!" he groaned and increased the strength and speed and thrust of his rod.

When he came, she felt intensely the jerking sensation that heralded the spilling of his seed. Her womb opened and welcomed him and in that moment she knew he had given her something very special and very dear, something that would be a part of them both.

* * * *

Waking to the sound of her friend getting sick in the bathroom, Angela flung the covers aside and padded quietly into the room. She took a washcloth from the rack and wet it, moved to Sharon's side and held the rag to the ill woman's forehead, crooning gently to her.

"Bet you wish you were with your sexy boss, huh?" Sharon gasped in between bouts of nausea.

"I'm right where I want to be," Angela said but realized her heart had stayed behind in New York.

Chapter Five

Rory glared at the answering machine. Though he'd been thrilled to hear her voice when he'd come home from a quick trip to the deli, he was annoyed that she hadn't told him where she would be spending the night. The disappointment ate at him like acid. Though common sense told him she would not call again, he kept listening for the phone to ring until the wee hours of the morning when he'd become so sleepy he'd curled up on the sofa and dozed off. Twice he'd sat bolt upright after experiencing carnal dreams of her so intense one had turned into a wet dream.

By morning, he was as grumpy as an old bear with a rotten tooth and he prowled around the loft poking at things like a spoiled brat, feeling trapped. When the phone rang, he didn't think just pounced on it.

"Where the hell are you?" he demanded, eyes flashing.

"In the lobby so buzz me up, lover," came a sultry voice.

He squeezed his eyes shut, silently cursing, shaking his head from side to side in anger.

"Rory? Are you there?"

It was Audrey LeVane and she was the last person he wanted to talk too much less see in person. He made a fist of his free hand and pressed it to his mouth to keep from bellowing with rage.

"Rory?"

"Yeah," he managed to get out. "Hey, look. I'm on my way down and"

"Good, then we can get breakfast," said the actress who the world's press called the most beautiful woman on the planet. "See you in five."

Before he could respond, she'd hung up and he threw the cell phone across the room, hissing like a wounded wolverine.

"God damn it!" he snarled. "God *damn* it!"

If he'd felt trapped before, he felt it even more constricted now. His fiery, vengeful Celtic temper was fast approaching the boiling point. Stomping into his bedroom, he snatched a pair of dirty jeans from the hamper, rummaged until he found a sweaty t-shirt, stripped out of his lounging pajamas and pulled the smelly clothing on, grimly smiling to himself, for he knew Audrey would be dressed to the nines in her designer duds. Slipping his feet into a pair of rundown loafers, he grabbed his wallet, keys, and cell phone and slammed the apartment door behind him as he stalked to the elevator with a muscle grinding in his cheek.

Audrey's back was to the elevator when it opened and as she turned with that killer smile she flashed her potential conquests, he saw her eyes flare in shock.

"Hey, babe," he said, sauntering over to her with his hands thrust into the pockets of his rumpled jeans. "What's up?"

Apparently she was too shocked to move back and when he leaned in to give her a kiss on her porcelain cheek, he saw her crinkle her nose with disgust and remembered he hadn't brushed his teeth nor combed his hair before he'd ventured out. A grim sense of satisfaction rippled through him.

"So, where are we going?" he asked, breathing heavily on her.

“I ... ah ... I ...” Audrey looked like a deer caught in headlights. “I just remembered I have a meeting with my agent.” She stepped back from him, a pained look almost overriding the Botox to show the creases in her otherwise smooth forehead. “Let’s take a rain check!”

He said nothing as she air-kissed him and spun around, hurrying out of his building so quickly the doorman barely had time to open the door for her. Rory laughed, caught the doorman shaking his head at him, and knew the guy was trying not to laugh, as well.

“All’s well that ends well, eh mate?” Rory asked him before turning and getting back into the elevator. As the doors closed, he hooted with laughter. “Bad, Rory. Bad, bad Rory,” he chuckled.

After taking a long shower and putting on fresh jeans, he went out on the balcony and started working on his lines. In a few days he’d be leaving for the movie set and the western he’d been looking forward to doing, having planned to take Angela with him. Now, he’d be going alone and that took some of the excitement and pleasure out of it.

* * * *

“Your Scots god might have been right,” Sharon said from the passenger seat of the rental car. “There may not be enough to see in Rhode Island to spend an entire day here.”

“Sure there is. We’ll tour the state capitol,” Angela said as she looked over the information they’d gotten at the welcome center. “Then we’ll explore Narragansett Bay, Blackstone Valley, spend the night in Newport, and gorge ourselves on seafood. There’s quite a bit of exciting things to do.”

Sharon yawned. “I guess.” She leaned her head on the back of the car seat. “So long as it doesn’t involve hiking, biking, and flying kites.”

Angela was worried about her friend. Sharon seemed to fall asleep at the drop of a hat and she’d barely touched her breakfast that morning. She didn’t want to do anything to wear Sharon out so was planning things that weren’t particularly stressful.

Re-folding the area map, Angela stuffed it between her seat and the center console and cranked the car. Pulling into traffic, she wondered what Rory was doing and sighed.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?” Sharon asked.

Angela glanced at her friend. “Is it that obvious?”

Sharon smiled. “You get this look and I know,” she answered. “Hell, more than ninety percent of the women on Earth get that look when they think about that Scottish hunk.” She twisted around to face Angela. “You love him, don’t you, Ang?”

“Is that obvious, too?” Angela inquired.

“Oh, yeah. Who can blame you?”

Angela propped her left arm on the edge of the car door and ran her knuckles back and forth over the glass. She tucked her lower lip between her teeth. “I think he loves me.”

“I’d say that was a good bet. Any man who would insist on his housekeeper calling him every night to let him know she’s okay has more than a passing interest in her,” Sharon commented. “I’d say jump his bones and be done with it.”

“But Sharon, he’s younger than my Tim!” Angela protested. “I’d feel like I was

robbing the cradle.”

“Oh, shit,” Sharon said, making a rude sound with her lips. “That’s a load of horse poopie and you know it. You’re just afraid to tell him you are lusting after his tight little butt because you think people will laugh at you.”

Angela shot her friend an accusing look. “And you don’t think they wouldn’t?” When Sharon just blinked at her, Angela asked her if she’d taken a good look at her lately.

“What am I supposed to be seeing when I look at you?” Sharon inquired.

“Wrinkles and graying hair and sagging skin and cellulite and red moles and drooping boobs and liver spots and baggy eyes and jowls heading south toward a double chin and”

“Egads, woman!” Sharon exclaimed, eyes wide, mouth open. “You’re falling apart as I watch! Quick, pull over before you turn into a pool of seething pus right before my eyes!”

“Fuck you,” Angela said with a tight purse of her lips.

“No, *you* fuck *him*,” Sharon countered. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to and haven’t fantasized about having your evil way with that delicious bulge I see in his jeans.”

“I weigh as much as he does!” Angela protested.

“Ooh,” Sharon said, pretending to shiver. “Then straddle those taut thighs of his and hurt the poor little booger, but fuck him while you’re doing it!” She pointed a finger at her friend. “At least one of you would get some pleasure out of this docey do-ing you two are doing around one another.”

“I’d squish him,” Angela said with a groan.

“Maybe he’d squish you,” Sharon said. “Ever think of that?”

“Every night of my life,” Angela admitted. “During every shower I take and with every look from those beautiful eyes of his.”

Sharon frowned. “What color *are* his eyes?” she asked.

“Green, actually,” she answered. “A pale, sparkling green you can get lost in.”

“When you call him tonight, be sure to tell him how much you miss him,” Sharon advised. “See what he says.”

Angela thought about that the rest of the day and when they stopped for the evening in Newport, had an early meal so Sharon could go to bed, Angela went down to the lobby and placed her nightly call.

He picked up on the first ring. “Okay, where are you? Give me the name of the hotel first then the town.”

She laughed. “Newport Inn, Newport. Want the telephone number?” When he said he did, she gave it to him. “Room 204, by the way.”

“How’s your friend?”

“Tired, but cheerful. I’m worried about her, Boss Man.”

“Maybe the trip is going to be too much for her, wench,” he said.

She didn’t respond to that but then cleared her throat, her hand on the receiver so tight she was losing feeling in her fingers. “I, ah, I miss you.”

“As much as I miss you?” he asked softly.

“Did you eat something totally unhealthy for supper?” she asked, feeling the heat staining her cheeks.

“I had four ham and cheese samiches with dill pickles and roasted peppers,” he answered. “Followed by a bag of tortilla chips and a jar of salsa.”

She groaned. “An entire jar of salsa?”

“It was a small jar,” he replied. “Large bag of chips, though. King-size actually.”

“How small a jar?” she wanted to know.

“Well, it was more like a small bottle.”

“The one from The Club?” she queried. “The one-hundred thirty eight ounce *small* bottle?”

“Ah, might have been. Can’t remember. I got a belly ache right now and really bad gas so it’s hard to think.”

“I imagine you do,” she said with a long exhalation of breath. “Tums are in my bathroom.”

“I’m lying on your bed,” he admitted.

She switched hands, shaking her numb hand to get the circulation started again. “Why?”

He didn’t hesitate, didn’t miss a beat. “So I can smell your scent on the sheets.”

“You’re between my sheets?”

“I’m afraid so.” He paused. “As naked as the day I was born, by the way.”

She smiled. “And you’ll be getting crumbs from whatever you’re eating all over me clean sheets, now won’t you, you reckless idjit?”

“I’ll wash ‘em a’fore you come home, lass,” he drawled. “I promise.”

“You’d better.”

They were silent for a moment then she told him she needed to go check on Sharon.

“Give her my best,” Rory said.

“I will and get up and get those Tums as soon as you hang up.”

“Yes, Boss Lady,” he said.

As she was hanging up, she thought she heard him say I love you and gooseflesh popped up all over her arms.

* * * *

For the next three nights she called him right after supper and they’d talk quietly, skirting the real things they wanted to say to one another but continuing their game of playful insults and long moments of poignant silences. When she called the sixth night of the trip, it was to his cell phone and he answered--not in the apartment they shared--but in the plush motor home that would be his home while he was on location in New Mexico.

“By this time tomorrow, we’ll be Nova Scotia,” she told him.

“You’re having a good time, aren’t you?” he asked, looking out the window of the motor coach at the crush of crew setting up for the next day’s production start.

“I wish you were with us,” she said.

“So do I but one of us has to earn a living to keep you in hot water--egads you should wait until you see this month’s water bill, wench!--and then there’s me salsa,” he mumbled. “Can’t live without me salsa.”

“Oh!” she said with excitement rife in her voice. “I found a recipe for a tortilla casserole you are going to love! I can’t wait to make it for you.”

“I can’t wait for you to come home and share my bed with me,” he said quietly.

Angela drew in a breath, her heart thumping hard against her chest. “W ... what?”

“You heard me,” he said. “We’ve been talking around it, wench, but now I’ve said it. When you come home, we’re going to sit down and”

“I’ve got to go!” she said. “Be good!”

“Angela ...,” he began, but she had already hung up and he realized she had not told him where in Maine she was staying the night. “Son of a bitch!” he snarled, pitching the cell phone on the floor with enough force to crack the plastic case. He picked it up to make sure it still worked and was relieved to hear the dial tone.

When she didn’t call the next night, he paced the floor until three in the morning then threw the phone down and stomped on it until it was completely destroyed. At his six AM wake-up, he turned into a vulgar-mouthed, raving lunatic who insulted the makeup artist, blew his lines, was surly to the director, hateful to his co-stars, and downright mean to the people at craft services, having one of the poor women in tears at his insufferable outburst. The only thing he didn’t do was kick his horse, though he came perilously close to doing just that when the animal balked at his rough treatment of it. By the time he had nearly demolished the interior of his motor home, breaking whatever he could get his hands on, the producer showed up at his door with a heavy scowl firmly in place and a chubby finger pointed straight at Rory.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Keith?” Jesse Brewster demanded. “Are you on drugs again?”

“I don’t do drugs!” Rory snarled at the money man. “I’ve never done fucking drugs!”

“Then what is it? Booze? A broad?” At Rory’s expression, Brewster nodded knowingly, chomping the cigar in his mouth between his teeth. “It’s a broad. Well, son, you’d better get over it real quick because you’re costing me money and I won’t have any more of your shit. You hearing me?”

“I hear you,” Rory snorted, turned around, and stalked off.

“You’d better hear me, boy!” Brewster yelled after him. “You ain’t so cute I can’t replace your ass!”

Rory lifted his middle finger in the air as he slammed into his motor home to find Bobby sitting at the bar.

“You got a call from Angie,” Bobby told him. “She tried calling your cell, but I guess it’s not working.” He glanced down at what was left of the cell phone lying in the middle of the floor.

“So she fucking calls you, huh?” Rory growled. “Why the fuck did she call *you*?”

“Because she couldn’t reach you?” Bobby suggested with a roll of his eyes. “I told her to call back in half an hour.”

Rory plopped down on the sofa and kicked off his boots. “Aye, well maybe I don’t want to talk to her,” he said, his brogue so thick Bobby barely understood him.

Bobby held his cell phone out to Rory. “Do you or don’t you?”

Rory snatched it out of his hand and tossed it to the sofa. “Right at the moment, I

don't fucking know if I will or not."

Throwing his hands in the air, Bobby left the trailer, mumbling something about pigheaded Scots.

His eyes drifting to the phone, Rory crossed his arms over his chest and lay there waiting for the thing to ring. The longer he waited, the madder he got so that by the time the silly ring tone peeled, he was sorely tempted to ignore it. Snarling, cursing under his breath, he finally picked it up before it could go to voice mail and barked into the mouthpiece.

"You'd better have a fucking good reason for not calling me last night, wench!" he shouted into the phone. "I sat up until three in the fucking morning waiting for you to fucking call and you"

"Sharon died last night," came the soft words, hitting his ear like the blow of a sledgehammer.

His hand tightened on the cell phone. "What?" he whispered.

"She came downstairs while I was talking to you night before last and I took one look at her and knew she needed to go to the emergency room," she said, her voice listless, hollow. "They did all they could but she died at 2:50 AM this morning. I've been trying to reach you since four. The studio wouldn't take a message."

He scrubbed a hand down his whiskered face. "God, baby, I'm sorry. I ..." He heard her sob. "Angela?"

"I don't know what to do," she said, her voice breaking. "Rory, I don't know what to do!" She broke down into keening.

"I'm on my way," he said. "I'll take care of everything." He remembered he had no idea where she was. "Where are you?"

"Bangor. I'm in Bangor," she said and he could barely make out her words. "At the Rustic Lodge."

"I'll be there as soon as I can!"

Hanging up after trying to calm her down, he ran out of the motor home, shouting for Bobby. When his assistant finally answered, Rory gave orders to get him a charter jet--damn the expense--and to get ready to accompany him to Maine.

"What's happened?" Bobby asked. He'd known something was wrong when she'd called him, had tried to get her to tell what was wrong but she'd only wanted to talk to Rory.

"Her friend died," Rory told him.

"Oh, shit," Bobby said. "Okay, I'll handle it. You'd better go talk to Brewster and Reynolds."

Rory nodded. The last thing he wanted was to have to deal with the executive producer and director of the movie but unless he never wanted to work again, he needed to make as nice to them as he could, hoping they'd be willing to shoot around him instead of suing his ass.

"You're shitting me!" Brewster said then waved a dismissive hand. "Get the hell out of here, then. You're no use to us until this is settled. We'll shoot around you."

It took less than an hour to charter a Gulf Stream and another half hour for the luxury plane to get airborne. The entire time Rory sat in the plush leather chair, chewing

on a thumbnail, and stared sightlessly out the window. Even as rain lashed the glass, he didn't seem to notice.

* * * *

She was sitting quietly in the lobby as prim and proper as any well-bred southern debutante. Her knees were pressed together, legs to one side, her back straight and not touching the chair. Her head was down, her hands clasped in her lap and she didn't hear the gasp of breath as Rory Keith came hurrying in.

"There she is," Bobby said uselessly as he followed in Rory's wake.

He came to her and hunkered down at her feet, smiling softly as she lifted her head to look at him.

"Hey, babe," he greeted her, reaching out to cover her hands with his. He caressed her chilled flesh.

"Hey," she replied. Her eyes were swollen, her nose red, and her bottom lip trembled.

"You still have your room here?" he asked gently.

She nodded and watched as he twisted around and looked at Bobby. "Find out what you can from the manager. I'll take her upstairs."

Bobby met Angela's tearful gaze. "We'll take care of everything, Angie. Don't you worry, okay?"

"Thank you, Bobby," she said.

Rory got to his feet and without another word, bent to lift her into his arms, hefting her high against his muscular chest.

"I can walk," she said, but she put her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Aye, well, so can I," he replied. He carried her toward the elevator. "This is me walking."

She smiled against his body and tightened her grip on him.

They said nothing on the way up to her room and when he got her there, called out to a maid to have her come open Angela's door.

"Poor thing," the Hispanic woman said. "She's been sitting downstairs all morning."

"Turn her bed down, will ya, love?" he asked the maid.

The woman finally realized who it was she was standing beside and visibly started. Her dark eyes grew round as she hurried in to do as he asked.

Rory didn't know he was carrying her toward the bed Sharon had slept in. "Not there," he heard her say. "That's Sharon's."

The maid turned away from that bed and pulled the spread and sheet down on Angela's. She stepped aside so Rory could lay the still woman down. "Can I get you anything, Mr. Keith?" she asked.

"You have a bar here?" he asked. At her nod, he asked for a double shot of whiskey. "As strong as the bartender's got."

"Yes, sir," the maid replied.

Angela curled up in the bed on her side, her back to him. She was wearing a long sleeveless summer dress and he bent over to take her sandals off.

“You wanna get butt naked with me, wench?” he asked as he sat down beside her and pulled off his boots so he could sit with her. He tugged his shirt from the waistband of his jeans.

“I want you to hold me,” she answered and when he drew his legs up on the bed, she went into his arms, half-lying against him as he stroked her back and smoothed her hair.

“That’s why I’m here,” he said. “I’m damned good at holding.”

She snuggled against him and started crying.

“Oh babe,” he said, feeling helpless as her body shook against his. “What can I do?”

The maid came in with the glass of whiskey and her kind eyes grew moist. She set the glass down on the nightstand and told Rory to call if he needed anything else. Quietly letting herself out, she put the Do Not Disturb sign on the door behind her.

“I didn’t just hang up on you,” Angela said. “I saw her come out of the elevator and”

“I know,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

She pulled her head back and looked up at him. “I didn’t want you to think I hung up because of what you said.”

He caressed her cheek. “I understand.” He leaned over and took up the glass of whiskey. “Here. I want you to drink this.”

She made a face but obliged him, gagging at the sharp, stinging taste, but she managed to get most of it down before she shook her head. “No more. That’s awful.”

He lifted the glass to his nose and took a whiff. “Pretty strong stuff,” he agreed. “Drink.”

“Rory”

“Drink,” he ordered, putting the glass to her lips.

She held her nose and gulped the rest of the whiskey, coughing as the liquor burned her throat.

There was a light tapping at the door and Bobby called out that it was him.

“Just a minute,” Rory said and eased his arm from around Angela and got off the bed, padding in his stocking feet to the door. When he opened it, Bobby slipped inside.

“I talked to the manager and to the authorities. There won’t be any need for an autopsy but they want to know what to do with the body,” he said in a low voice.

“We’ll have to discuss funeral arrangements and getting the body back to” Rory began, but Angela’s low voice stopped him.

“She didn’t want a funeral. She said to just cremate her and for me to take the ashes home to Georgia,” she told them.

“I’ll see about contacting a crematorium,” Bobby said. “Anything else you need me to do?”

“Someone will have to turn the rental car in,” Angela said.

“Bobby can drive it back to New York and turn it in there,” Rory said and at her listless nod, he told Bobby to get a room there for they’d be spending the night.

“You sure?” Bobby asked.

“I’m positive,” Rory snapped. “Just do it.”

“Okay.”

Bobby left and Rory came back to the bed, stretching out once again beside her. He enfolded her in his arms and rested his chin atop her head.

“Are you going to get into trouble with the studio?” she asked.

“Nah,” he scoffed. “They’ll shoot around me.” He ran his palm lightly up and down her arm.

“Rory?”

“Yeah, babe?”

She said nothing for a moment then pushed against him so she could look up into his eyes. She held his inquisitive gaze. “Life is short,” she said. “Sharon lied to me when she said she had two months. She knew it was only weeks. It breaks my heart that she didn’t even have that much time.”

“I know,” he said and smoothed the hair back from her temple.

“I love you.” She said it simply, without fanfare, without her voice breaking.

He grinned at her. “Finally succumbed to me lucky charms, huh?”

She put her fingertips to his finely chiseled lips, answering his smile. “You wore me down, Boss Man.”

“You know I’ll hold you to those words, now, don’t you?” he asked, searching her gaze. “There won’t be any taking them back. There’s no do-overs involved in this.”

“I would like to hear your feelings on it, though,” she said. “On what I said.”

“That you love me?” He snorted. “Hell, wench. Every woman between the ages of two months and a hundred loves me. Why should you be any different?”

“Conceited oaf,” she said with a sigh. “To you everything is a joke.”

“You want jokes or you want to hear me say I love you with all my heart and all my soul and all my massive ego?”

“Do you love me?” she asked.

“With all my heart and all my soul and most of my massive ego,” he said. “That part of me that isn’t madly in love with myself.”

She shook her head and though she felt like crying again she settled down in his arms and put her arm around his waist. “You are so not stuck on yourself are you?”

“Of course, we’ll have to hire a housekeeper to replace you,” he said and when her head snapped up his eyebrows rose. “Won’t we?”

“Hell, no!” she said. “That’s still my job. I like taking care of you and making a home for you. I want to care for you and make you a proper home, and I don’t want any other woman living with us!”

“Well, I suppose that’s good then,” he said. “I wasn’t sure how I’d pay another housekeeper’s salary plus meet our water bill obligations.”

She gave him a playful pinch. “I know a way to settle that problem, Keith.”

“How’s that?”

Her eyes went dark with desire. “We could share a shower.”

His smile was slow and full of wicked delight. “Well, now, wench, that is, indeed, a possible solution to the matter.” He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. “A damned good one, actually. It just might keep me out of the poorhouse.”

He leaned down and took her mouth with his, his tongue sliding sensuously over

her bottom lip to get her to open to him, his teeth pulled her lip down so he could slide inside, taste her, thrust deeply.

His hand lowered to her breast and for the first time he cupped her and a shiver rippled down his body. He turned into her so they were touching from chest to groin, his palm molding her soft flesh as his hand shook.

"I have waited so long to do this," he whispered against her mouth.

She worried about him seeing her in the time-worn condition in which her body existed. She worried about all the things she'd told Sharon screamed her age. In the heat of passion it was easy to overlook imperfection but in the clear light of day such deficiencies are all too effortlessly seen. This man who held her was perfection, in the height of his masculinity, his flawless male beauty. He was strong and firm and sleek and all that was ideal for a man his age and the most telling word in that observation was age.

"Rory ...," she said, her forehead creased with concern.

"You think too bloody damned much, wench," he grumbled. He sat up and began unbuttoning his shirt.

"I just think ..."

"You think too bloody damned much," he repeated as he peeled the shirt from his wide shoulders and firm chest.

She stared at the powerful anatomy beside her own and felt even more inadequate.

"Take off your clothes and let me have my way with you or--by the gods I swear it--I'll rip 'em from you," he growled at her as he swung his legs from the bed and began removing his jeans. He yanked off his socks and dropped them on the floor. As she had come to realize all too well, the man disdained the use of underwear and when he lay back down and turned to prop his head in his hand to stare at her, she exhaled loudly.

She lifted her hips and pulled her long dress up then sat up to pull it over her head. Her bra was just an ordinary cotton garment as were her briefs. There was nothing sexy or enticing about them but then again--to her way of thinking--there was nothing to excite a man in the way she looked, anyway. What she wouldn't have given for the bra to have been a lacy little wisp of see-through material and her panties a sexy black thong and her body suited to show those things off to advantage.

"Well, at least you aren't wearing bloomers," she heard him snort and when she looked up into his devilish eyes she saw him grinning wickedly. He wagged his eyebrows and made a gurr sound deep in his throat.

"You are awful!" she proclaimed and wrapped her arms over her breasts, but then groaned for doing that only pushed her tummy out in a most unattractive fold of fat.

"I'm horny as hell, wench," he said and before she could react, he'd leaned over and tugged her panties down in one fell swoop, eliciting a squeal of outrage from her.

She batted his hands away as he would have snagged her bra and they tussled for possession of it. His fingers found her ribcage and he tickled her, flinging a long leg over hers to sit up and wrestle with her until he had her laughing from his marauding fingers.

Rory knew what he was doing. It wasn't just the grief over losing her best friend in such a terrible way but Angela's natural shyness, her worry that he wouldn't find her alluring that he meant to vanquish. He wanted to get her laughing, make her forget, and then lead her into a stunningly beautiful session of lovemaking that would make her stop

thinking about anything other than him. He wasn't all that egotistical but he knew himself to be a skilled lover and he intended to use every weapon in his arsenal to push all negative thoughts from her head.

He finally took possession of the bra and lifted his arm high out of her reach, swung the thing around and around over his head, whooping in victory before flinging it across the room. As she wriggled beneath him in an attempt to get up, he all but fell on her, wrapped her in his arms and long legs, and flipped over to his back with her lying imprisoned atop him.

"Now, let's see which one of us is gonna yell uncle first," he said in a low, husky voice. He tightened his grip on her. "I intend to turn you inside out, wench."

Looking down into his beautiful face and those bewitching eyes that were now more blue than green she lowered her head and slanted her mouth over his, thrusting her tongue between his lips. His grunt of surprise made her happy and as she ground her lips upon his and claimed him as she'd wanted to for years, all her inhibitions and worries and doubts and qualms melted away. By the time he turned over so she lay beneath him with his lower body wedged between her legs, she had completely given up all control to Rory Keith.

He kissed his way to her breasts and when he took her nipple between his teeth and looked up through his eyelashes at her, a grin on his lips, she put her hands on his cheeks.

"I wish I had hair to hold onto," she said, her gaze settling on his shorn hair.

"It'll grow back," he said, not releasing her nipple, stabbing the tip lightly with his tongue as he spoke so his words were garbled. "Grab hold of me ears if you must."

She laughed. It was his irreverent sense of humor, that terribly devastating grin and the way he crinkled his nose when he teased her that made her love him all the more. He was all man but he was a little boy at heart and the combination of those two was why women found him so damned adorable and irresistible.

"You're thinking again. Stop that," he said and suckled hard on her nipple to distract her.

She gave herself up to his delicious lovemaking, closing her eyes as he shifted to her other breast then kissed his way down her belly, licked her navel then moved lower still.

"If you do what I think you're gonna do, I insist on equal time," she said, not opening her eyes.

She felt his head pop up and when she opened one eye and looked at him, his face was positively alight with delight.

"You're gonna gobble me dangly, wench?"

"Gobble it, lick it, suck it" She closed her eyes. "You name it, I'm gonna do it to it, stud, until you cry uncle."

He moved so fast she gasped as he slithered down in the bed like a hot little eel and his mouth closed possessively over her clit. Just as he was with everything he did from acting to singing to sword play to dancing to just looking mouthwatering in black leather, he plied her body with an ease and expert handling that had her panting and writhing beneath his knowledgeable lips.

His slid his index and middle fingers slid into her cunt, twisted them gently, then turned them so they were crooked upward and she knew he was searching for that illusive spot many sexperts did not believe existed as he pushed deep. His free hand was on her lower belly--pressing down gently but firmly--as he sought her g-spot and when he found it, when she moaned and arched her hips upward, he chuckled low in his throat.

"Gotcha," he said and moved his fingers so he tugged against her pelvic bone then he began lifting his hooked fingers up, using the same rhythm he would if it were his cock inside her.

"Oh my God!" she gasped. Not only had he found what he was seeking, he knew damned well how to ply it. Her ex-husband had certainly never located it and she doubted he would have known how to stroke it if he'd stumbled on by accident.

It wasn't really a stroke Rory was using but rather than an upward rhythmic pressing that was turning her inside out, reducing her to mush. Her head was thrashing back and forth on the pillow and since he had little hair to grasp, her fingers were buried in the sheet beneath her arching hip.

"That's it, wench," he said in that husky brogue. "Find the tempo and let it take you."

It felt as though she had to pee and yet she knew that wasn't the case. She knew enough about the legendary g-spot to know the pressure was good, that it was the precursor to one helluva of an

She tensed, going stiff as she felt it rushing at her.

"Oh, yeah. Come for your man, baby," he ordered. "Come for him hard and juicy."

A rush of intense pleasure shot between Angela's legs and pulsed like a caution light--pleasure-release-pleasure-release-pleasure

"Rory!" she cried out, twisting the sheets as wave after wave of the most delicious spasms rocketed through her. She bore down on his fingers, felt something trickle from her sheath, and he tugged gently at her pelvic bone as her muscles continued to squeeze around him.

"That's it, my love," he whispered. "That's what you needed." He flexed his fingers inside her. "That's exactly what my woman needed."

She felt like a deflated balloon drifting down to collapse on the mattress. Her legs and arms were like lead weights, unable to be lifted. Her breath came in a ragged pant as she strove to get her pounding heart under control and she felt so vulnerable lying there motionless, legs splayed wide as he bent to lick at the juices that had seeped from her warm channel.

Angela shuddered as his tongue dragged over her sensitive flesh. She heard him make a sound as though he had consumed the sweetest nectar to be found and then she was staring down past her quivering belly as he raised his head and gave her a look that would have melted titanium.

He simply said, "My woman."

She used the last of her waning strength to hold her arms up to him. "Come here, Boss Man," she said. "Let your woman hold you."

He crawled up her and laid his full weight upon her, understanding that was what

she wanted. He was heavy but her arms settled around him and she seemed to pull him down even closer. His head rested on her shoulder as she stroked his back, running her fingernails down his flesh to raise gooseflesh.

“I like that,” he said on a long sigh.

“Um hum,” she muttered.

When he was almost asleep, she nudged him off her to lie on his back. He grumbled for a moment, but when she moved down in the bed, his eyes snapped wide open and he lifted his head to look at her as she positioned herself between his thighs, looking up at him with a mischievous glint.

“My turn,” she said and lowered her head to take him in her mouth.

Chapter Six

In January of the following year, the nominations for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences coveted awards were read. Among those nominated for Best Actor was Rory Keith for his role as famed Scottish chieftain Rob Roy MacGregor in the epic *Wild Lowland Wind*. And in March he escorted Angela to the Kodak Theater located at the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue in Los Angeles. As they walked upon the red carpet and video cameras recorded the moment, paparazzi hurled question after question at the couple the whole world had come to refer to as the Bandit and his Wench--a term taken from the western the actor was making when he and his housekeeper became an item.

In the beautiful designer dress Rory and she had designed together, Angela looked radiant. She'd lost fifty pounds working out with him and though he had argued stringently against it, she'd had a light face lift and liposuction done. She looked much younger than her fifty-nine years and felt twenty years younger than that.

Making their way into the theater, they stopped to talk to friends and pleasant rivals alike, for Rory to do a few short interviews or to make tentative appointments with the movers and shakers of Hollywood, his hand either at the small of Angela's back or with fingers entwining hers.

"Nervous?" she asked him as they took their seat. She was so proud of him in his tuxedo with his hair at the length she loved so much.

"Did you bring the barf bag like I told you?" he countered.

Angela leaned against his shoulder. "You're going to be fine, Boss Man."

"I'm gonna make a fool of meself and puke on the stage when I go up to present the Oscar for" He stopped, eyes flaring. "Sweet Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! What the fuck am I presenting the Oscar for again?"

She stroked his thigh and felt the muscle bunch beneath her palm. "Will you just relax?" She gave him a tender look. "You're going to win, you know."

He shook his head firmly. "No, it's Brosnan's year. He's gonna win playing that psycho." He glanced around then lowered his voice. "This is the first time all five nominees have all been Celts. Did you know that? Brosnan and Liam are both Irish, Ewan and Sean are Scots, and me, I'm Scots, too."

"You are?" she asked with a gasp. "By the plaid of the MacGregor, I didn't know that, Rory John!"

He crossed his eyes at her. "Behave, wench, or I swear to you, I'm gonna blow chunks in your fucking lap."

Throughout the evening, they held hands when Rory wasn't up presenting and exchanging witty banter with his co-presenter, Camryn Manhiem, who had been his co-star in *The Wayward Wind* western.

When it came time for famed actress Dame Judi Dench to announce the nominees for Best Actor, Rory's right leg was bouncing up and down violently and he was chewing on a thumb nail.

"Brosnan," Angela heard him saying under his breath. "It's gonna be Brosnan."

"Keith," she countered. "It's gonna be Rory."

He shook his head. "Brosnan. It's gonna be"

"And the Oscar goes to Rory Keith for Wild Lowland Wind," Dame Judi proclaimed with a pleased smile.

"See?" Rory told Angela. "I told you Brosnan"

"Keith," she corrected him. "Rory Keith won for Wild Lowland Wind."

All around him people were clapping and he just sat there, stunned, the cameras recording his pale face, the tip of his tongue caught between his teeth. He truly had not expected to win, hadn't even prepared an acceptance speech.

"Get up, you lousy Scot," fellow actor and pal Josh Lucas said from the seat behind him, poking him in the back. "You won the damned thing. Go get it!"

"I won," Rory said, turning his head to look at Angela. "Wench, I fucking won!"

She had to push him out of his seat but once up, he was pumping his fist in the air and practically running up the steps, throwing his arms around Dame Judi once there and lifting her from the floor, swinging her and her expensive silk gown around in a circle. He gave her a reckless kiss then set her down and the world watched the elegant actress fan her face like a teenage girl.

"Oh my God," Rory said as he clutched the Oscar to his chest and stared out into the audience. "Oh my God." His gaze fell on Angela and he grinned like a little boy. He held the Oscar up with one hand and pointed to it with the other. "Look what they gave me, wench, for just havin' fun!"

The audience broke into laughter and clapped.

He looked back down at the award and he took a deep breath before setting it down on the table before him. "Thank you to the members of the Academy for this wonderful award but if you'll permit me, there is something I need to do just now. I was gonna do it later this evening but there's no better time than right now."

As the world watched, Rory John Keith left the podium and walked back down into the audience and to Angela's seat. With millions of people watching, he reached out to take her hand. When she reluctantly gave it to him, he grinned.

"Angela Evans," he said in his thick brogue, "Before the entire world, my family, my friends, and everybody else watching, I want to tell you that I love you with all my heart and all my soul. I've never told that to another woman and never will again. When you came into my life you made me start living. You chased away my loneliness and brought me happiness and peace."

Those in the audience made an aaahing sound and many of them clapped.

"And I want you to know that although I am so very proud of this award these nice folks have given me, the only thing in life I really want is you. I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my days with you."

Angela's eyes widened and her lips parted. She was stunned into silence as those who could not see stood up as the young actor went to one knee before his startled companion. Tears gathered in his green eyes as he brought her hand to his heart and held it there as he used his other hand to fish in his coat pocket. What he brought out made those who could see what he held draw in a slow breath. He opened the red velvet box with a casual flip of his thumb to reveal an emerald cut, four-carat alexandrite engagement ring set on an intricate gold Celtic filigree knot band.

“Angela, my precious, beautiful love, the blood that pumps through my heart, the breath that fills my lungs,” he said, a tear falling down his cheek, “will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

Those gathered at the Kodak Theater could have heard a pin drop as breaths were held, ears strained for the Wench’s answer. Hands were pressed over mouths, gripped the arms of chairs, and were clasped in front of chests and under chins.

Angela was trembling as she stared into his beautiful face. All around her the room was still—the entire world watching and waiting for her answer on television sets from Australia to Zanzibar—and when she smiled and nodded, unable to speak, an ear-shattering roar rose to the rafters and wild applause and whistles and hoots rang out as camera whirred and the orchestra began playing the love song from *The Wayward Wind*.

“Yeah?” Rory mouthed, his words drowned out by the noise.

“Yeah,” she agreed and she had to bite her lip as he slipped the color-changing jewel ring upon her finger.

He got up and drew her to her feet, enfolding her in his arms for a sensuous kiss that would appear on the front page of every newspaper in the world and magazines covers far and wide for months to come.

* * * *

It was a quiet little ceremony performed in a small Catholic church in the Scottish Highlands with Rory’s family and a few of his best friends in attendance. Donal Keith, Rory’s oldest brother, was his best man and Martha-Helen Shutts, a childhood friend of Angela’s, was her matron of honor. She was escorted down the aisle and given in marriage by her sons, Timothy and Matthew. Her granddaughter Vivica and grandson Peyton was flower girl and ring bearer. Father Craig Keith, a cousin of Rory’s, performed the honors. So carefully had the wedding been planned by Rory’s mother and sisters, the secret kept so well, there were no paparazzi hovering about to ruin the festivities that lasted well into the evening.

The couple sailed to Australia aboard a beautiful tall ship for a two month-long honeymoon.

* * * *

Rory was so angry he could not contain himself and when Angela found him, he was sitting on his precious bear skin rug shredding tabloid after tabloid and cursing brutally. Torn paper surrounded him as he sat tailor fashion, lips drawn back from his teeth as he ripped the *Star* into small pieces.

“That’s not going to help, Boss Man,” she told him as she curled up on the sofa.

“I ought to sue every one of them and the fucking bitch!” He glared at his wife. “I will sue every last one of them and that fucking bitch!”

Angela could understand his anger. It had begun two evenings before when his mother had called from London to ask him if what she’d read in the Scottish press was true.

* * * *

“What are they saying about me now?” he’d asked, sighing heavily.

“That you are having a baby with Audrey LaVane,” his mother snapped.

“What?”

Angela had been making them a cup of hot chocolate and her husband's roar had erupted so violently, so loudly, she'd nearly dropped one of the cups. She'd come hurrying into the living area. "What's wrong?"

"What the hell does it say, Mom?" her husband demanded. "Read the damned thing to me."

As Angela watched, Rory's face had gone from mottled pink then drained of color before flushing to a dangerous red hue and she had stepped up to him to put a hand on his back, worried.

"I haven't touched that woman!" Rory nearly screamed into the phone. "Not since I met Angie." He listened for a moment then shook his head savagely. "Yes, but not since Angie!" He listened some more, trying to break in on whatever his mother was saying. "Mom?"

Listening. "Mom?" Then fury erupted. "Damn it, Mom, will you let me speak? I didn't get that bitch pregnant. I couldn't even if I wanted to which I sure as hell don't! You have to sleep with someone to get them preggers and I haven't slept with Audrey in over three years!"

Angela cringed. She knew Rory hadn't been a saint before she met him, that he'd had more than his share of women, but to hear him say it hurt.

"I didn't get nobody pregnant, Mom!" he yelled. He listened for a few seconds then growled like an enraged bear. "Mom, you're fucking not listening to me!"

"Rory, calm down before you have a stroke," Angela told him and when he suddenly threw the phone across the room as hard as he could and stormed toward the front door, she didn't know whether to stop him or pick up the phone. Hearing his mother's voice from the cell phone, her decision was made. She stooped down to pick it up as the door to their apartment slammed shut so hard it rattled the wall.

"Mom?" Angela asked. "Tell me what's happening."

* * * *

Rory made a growling sound low in his throat as he ripped more paper.

"You're making a mess," Angela told him and when he swung his head toward her, she saw tears in his eyes.

"I haven't touched that skanky whore!" he said. "I've not cheated on you, wench!"

She gave him a gentle look. "I know that, Rory."

"If she were the last bitch on earth, I wouldn't touch her with a foot thick rubber condom on a ten foot pole!"

Angela smiled. "Then why are you so upset?"

The tears slid down his cheeks. "Because people will believe I was unfaithful to you!" he said. "They'll think I cheated on you!"

Her heart ached at his misery and she lowered her feet to the floor and sat forward, her arms wrapped around her as she spoke softly to him. "I know you didn't do it, baby, or I would have walked out that door and been long gone before now," she told him. At his look of concern, she cocked her head to one side. "I got enough of being cheated on when I was married to Tim Senior," she said. "If I'd thought you'd done the same thing to me--no matter how much I love you, Rory Keith--I would be out that door

in a heartbeat.”

“I would never cheat on you,” he stated. He reached up to swipe at his tears, smearing printer’s ink on his cheek and chin. “Why would she say something like that?”

Angela took a deep breath then exhaled slowly. “Sweetie, since the first movie stars emerged from the celluloid swamp of Hollywood, women have been doing stuff like this. Why they do it is as varied as the movies being churned out every year. A woman becomes obsessed with a movie star and fantasizes about him. She wants him to notice her and if by charging him with fathering her baby--true or not--she gains the world’s notice and in the doing his notice--she feels connected to him. Why a woman who is, herself, a world-famous star would do is either because she thinks the publicity will help her or she wants to get back at the man she accuses. I imagine the latter is true in this case.”

“Then what the hell should I do?” he demanded. “I don’t want people to think I’d ever cheat on . . .”

“Contact your lawyer and have him set up a paternity test,” Angela said. “After you do that and you prove it isn’t your child, sue her ass then go after the tabloids. When you win the suit--and you will--turn the money over to a charity.”

“I want an apology and an admission of guilt from her!” he snapped.

“That would be playing into her hands and eliciting more publicity for her. Just let it go. Don’t discuss it with reporters or anyone else. Ignore it and her. Let your lawyers handle it.”

His shoulders slumped. “How’d you get to be so smart, wench?”

“Age,” she said then nudged her chin toward the mess he’d made. “Now clean that up because *I’m* not going to do it for you.”

He looked down at the litter, a deep crease in his forehead. “Stuffing it into the trash bin won’t be as satisfying as tearing it was.”

“Tough shit,” she said then got up to start supper. “Get to it, you unruly Scot.”

* * * *

The brouhaha over Audrey LeVane’s false accusations against Rory Keith lasted less than a month and when the paternity results came back, proving he could not be the father of the starlet’s child, suits were filed. Settlements were made out of court for undisclosed sums of money.

Chapter Seven

Four Years Later

What had started out as a playful romp to celebrate the wrapping of his latest movie turned into something far more serious and would prove to have deeper reaching repercussions than Rory could ever have imagine.

Her name was Velvet MacCarrick, a Scottish lass who had taken the movie industry by storm with her first starring role opposite Hugh Jackson in a remake of the Stanley Kranson classic, *On the Beach*. Playing the role sultry Eva Garder had made famous in the movie alongside Greg Peckton, Velvet had garnered an Oscar nod for her role.

With thick long black hair that fell in waves to her shapely shoulders, the five-foot-eight actress sported a luscious 42-C bra, a twenty-two inch waist, and curvaceous hips that flowed into legs to rival those of the famed Betsy Gable. Add a sensuous voice, startling sapphire eyes and full lips that bore a striking resemblance to those of actress Angela Jolly and you had the makings of a temptress the likes of which Hollywood had not seen in decades.

And Rory Keith had not been immune to the devastating and direct charms the lovely young woman threw at him, no holds barred, when she had been cast as his leading lady in the psychological thriller *Depths of Desire* being shot on location in Greece. The fallout from his week-long affair with the starlet that began at the wrap party made front page news and when he went home to New York with his tail tucked between his legs, he had found the loft apartment empty of his wife's presence, her personal possessions gone.

* * * *

"Why wasn't she on the set with you?" his mother had demanded of him. "Why didn't she go to Greece with you?"

Rory sat on the floor of the bedroom that he'd shared with Angela for six years, with his back against the edge of the mattress. With his free hand, he rubbed at the migraine that was crushing his right temple. "She had been with me, Ma," he replied. "She had come home because her granddaughter had been in a motorcycle wreck. Viv is okay but she has a broken shoulder. It wasn't where I could leave the set and ..."

"Did you even *want* to leave that set, R.J.?" his mother interrupted. There was bright anger in her tone and her brogue was very pronounced. "Or were you already flirting with that little tramp with her silly bee-stung lips?"

"Have you heard from Angie, Ma?" Rory asked, not wanting a lecture from his mother.

"If I had, I wouldn't tell you!" his mother snapped. "I am very disappointed in you, Rory John. Your Dad and your brothers are, too--not to mention how your sisters feel about what you've done. We're all *very* disappointed in you!"

The loud click on the other end of the line told Rory his mother had abandoned him to his own feelings of guilt. He pulled the cell phone screen to his mouth and thumped it against his lips several times before dropping it into his lap.

He'd called Bobby and everyone else he could think to call but no one knew

where Angela was. None of her friends in Georgia would admit to knowing where she'd gone and her sons wouldn't even answer his calls. It was almost as though she'd simply vanished off the face of the earth.

He had hired a detective agency to locate her but two months into their investigation, they still had no word for him regarding his wife's whereabouts. When the phone call from Velvet MacCarrick came to his Malibu beach house a month later, it was all he could do to be civil to the woman he blamed for his predicament. The world had fallen out of love with Rory Keith and his name was being plastered in every tabloid and sleazy publication from Atlanta to Zurich.

Having gone off the wagon the evening before and already three sheets to the wind, he was totally unprepared for Velvet's words to him: "I'm pregnant."

For a long moment, he sat there with the cell phone pressed to his ear, blinking until the words finally registered, and then he started laughing.

"Rory, did you hear me?" Velvet asked.

He laughed so hard tears came into his eyes and he wiped them away with the heel of his free hand. He was still laughing when he got up from his chair and stumbled into the bedroom, nearly bent double as he continued to laugh uncontrollably. He scooped up his car keys and left the house, mindless of the infrequent thunderstorm that was slamming in from the ocean.

It wasn't clear to authorities if he lost control of his Jaguar because of the rain or if he deliberately aimed for the tree around which he wrapped the silver sports car but since there were no skid marks on the highway and the actor had a blood-alcohol content of .30, they were inclined to believe he had passed out at the wheel.

* * * *

Angela shifted in the uncomfortable chair and flexed her shoulders. The steady beep-beep-beep of the machines had kept her awake and she had a miserable headache as light seeped in from the cracks in the vertical blinds. She had spent much of the night sitting there watching the steady drip-drip-drip of the IV. Exhausted, she got up and went to the sink, turned on the cold water then bent over to splash water onto her face. Straightening, she looked into the mirror and hardly recognized the woman she saw there. There were dark circles beneath her eyes, her face looked tight and drawn. She frowned and turned away to pull some rough paper towels from the dispenser. Blotting her face dry, she went back to the chair but just couldn't force herself to sit down. Instead, she bent over to retrieve her purse and quietly left the room.

"Good morning," the nurse at the desk greeted her.

"Good morning," Angela said. "I'm going down to the cafeteria to get some breakfast. Will you page me if there's any change?"

"I sure will," the nurse agreed.

The elevator took forever to come up and when Angela walked inside the cage, she hung her head.

"We believe he might have been trying to kill himself," Bobby had told her when he'd reached her the night it had happened. "He's in pretty bad shape."

Angela sagged against the elevator wall, remembering her first look at Rory when she'd arrived at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. She'd had to grab for

Bobby to keep her knees from buckling.

"It looks worse than it really is," Bobby had assured her. "He was lucky he was drunk when it happened."

"Let's list the relatively minor stuff first," Rory's doctor said. "He has a concussion, four broken ribs, a broken left arm, and his right leg is broken. A ruptured spleen and a punctured lung resulted in emergency surgery from which he has yet to awaken. Ironically enough, there isn't a scratch on that handsome face of his. How he managed that is beyond us considering the windshield buckled inward when he struck the tree."

Since the afternoon before Angela had sat at Rory's bedside--willing him to open those beautiful green eyes--but he had remained in a coma, as still as death though now and again she saw his eyes moving back and forth behind the closed lids.

"That may be REM sleep," a nurse had informed her. "The doctors aren't sure if there is such a thing for patients in a coma but since his eyes are tracking like that, it would seem that's what's happening." She'd patted Angela's hand. "That might also mean he's struggling to wake up. Talk to him, dear. I really believe he can hear you."

Angela had not done that. Other than bending over him to tell him she was there when she'd first arrived, she'd said nothing else to her husband.

The cafeteria in the South Tower was livelier at 6:45 a.m. than Angela would have thought it would be. She ordered a large breakfast from the grill since she hadn't eaten the evening before and was so hungry she reasoned her headache was based on her lack of nourishment. She had just sat down to eat when she looked up to see Rory's mother and father hurrying toward her. She pushed her chair back and stood.

"They told us you were here," Ewan Keith said, bending down to kiss Angela on the cheek. "We just arrived."

"Have you been in to see him?" Angela asked. She hugged Rory's mother then told them to take a seat.

"We did," Johanna Keith replied. "My poor baby boy looks so helpless laying there."

"Do you want some breakfast?" Angela queried and when they shook their heads and told her to continue eating, she picked up her fork. "Where are you staying?"

"Bobby got us a hotel room but we haven't been there yet. He's parking the car," Ewan said. "We wanted to see R.J. right off."

"The doctor says he'll have a full recovery," she told them.

"Maybe his body will, dear, but will his heart?" Johanna asked. "He's been so worried about you. He's had men searching for you all over"

"I know," Angela said. "Bobby told me."

"How did you learn of his accident?" Rory's father asked.

"On the news like most everyone else," Angela replied. "I called Bobby right away and I took the next plane out."

"From where?" Johanna inquired but Angela didn't answer her. She exchanged a look with her husband who shook his head as though to caution his wife not to push. But Rory's mother ignored him. "Angie, he's sorry for what he did,"

"Men make mistakes," Ewan said. "He's paying for his."

“Not all men cheat on their wives, Ewan,” Angela said softly as she pushed her plate aside. “I’ve just been lucky enough to find two who do.”

Johanna winced and looked to her husband for support.

“Can’t you find it in your heart to forgive him, dear?” Ewan asked. “He’s been so miserable without you.”

Angela started to answer but then saw Bobby coming toward them. She smiled at him as he took a seat and sat forward. Her smile faded when she saw the look in Bobby’s eyes. “What’s happened now?” she asked.

“Velvet MacCarrick held a press conference this morning in Edinburgh,” Bobby said. “It seems she wanted the world to know she’s pregnant with Rory’s baby and that she’s flying to his side.”

“Oh, not again!” Johanna said with disgust. “And now of all times for that little tart to make such a statement! She’d better not show her lying face here!”

“It could be true this time, Jo,” Angela told her mother-in-law. “He certainly can’t deny he slept with the woman when the entire world knows he did.”

“Those damned indecent pictures from Greece!” Ewan snarled. “They made me sick to my stomach!”

“I wasn’t thrilled to see them myself,” Angela quipped, the image of the telephoto shots of her husband’s naked body covering Velvet’s like a red hot poker in her mind.

“The hospital isn’t going to allow her to bring her dog and pony show here, but they can’t keep her from talking to reporters outside,” Bobby reminded everyone. He looked at Angela. “If you don’t want her visiting your husband, you’d better tell the administration that right now. You can keep her from seeing him and turning this into a spectacle.” He gave her a steady look. “I know for a fact he wouldn’t want her in his room.”

Angela nodded. “I’ll take care of it, Bobby. I’d like you to hire a couple of guards to make sure she doesn’t slip past.”

“Will do.”

“You need to take care of your husband,” Johanna said. “Running away from your problems never solved anything, Angie.”

“I know that,” she said. Once more she got to her feet. “Bobby, take Rory’s parents up to his room. I’ll go see about getting the Velvet Touch kept away.”

Rory’s mom would have spoken again but her husband reached over to place a restraining hand on his wife’s arm. Johanna Keith clamped her lips together but her stormy hazel eyes promised the two of them would talk about it later.

“Oh, Mrs. Keith,” the nurse said as she came toward Angela outside the cafeteria. “I was just coming to get you. He’s waking up.”

Angela’s heart did a funny little squeeze. “I’ve just heard that the MacCarrick woman is on her way to visit my husband. Could you make sure she isn’t allowed in?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the nurse stated. “Gladly.”

When Angela arrived back at Rory’s room, his doctors were in with him, the room crowded with people. She was waiting outside when his parents joined her. “I heard him talking,” she told his mother. “He sounds groggy but at least he’s out of the coma.”

“Bobby is calling an agency to get guards sent over,” Ewan said.

“You two should go in to see him when the doctors come out,” Angela said.

“Absolutely not!” Johanna said. “Yours should have been the first face the lad saw when he opened his eyes.”

Angela didn't want to argue with her mother-in-law, so she just nodded her agreement at the woman's words. She was pacing in front of the door when the medical team came out. Dr. Jonas Leverton, Rory's physician, came over to put a hand on her shoulder.

“He's gonna be just fine, Mrs. Keith. He's not clear on what happened to him just yet though.”

“Does he know I'm here?”

The doctor smiled. “He asked if anyone had gotten in touch with you and I told him we had and that you were here. He asked me to fetch you for him. He is quite anxious to see you.”

“Thank you, doctor,” she said and took a deep breath before pushing open the door to Rory's room. She saw him turn his head toward her and the look on his face cut her to the quick.

“I didn't know if you'd come,” he said.

“I'm here, Boss Man,” she said and went to the bed.

His gaze was moving over her face as though he wasn't sure it was her.

“Where've you been, wench?” he asked, moisture gathering in his wounded eyes.

“Where you would never have looked,” she said and snaked her hand over the bed's safety railing to touch the arm into which the IV was trailing. His other arm was encased in a thick cast. “I don't guess you had anything better to do with your time than see if that ugly car of yours could mow down a century old tree.”

“You know me,” he said. “Always trying to see what I can do.”

“You're very trying,” she agreed and slid her fingers through his. “But you're lovable when you fuck up.”

He flinched. “There's something I have to tell you, Angie,” he said.

“If it's about your supposed impending fatherhood, I've already heard,” she said. “As has the rest of the world by now.”

He closed his eyes, squeezing the lids together tightly, giving her the impression he was in a lot of pain. “The bitch.”

“You might not dodge this bullet, Harper,” she said, using the name of his character in *The Wayward Wind*. “She very well could be carrying your child.”

“Angie, I . . .”

“Your mom and dad are here so I'm not going to stay long. I know they want to look in on you.” She tried to ease her fingers from his but he tightened his grip, weak though it was.

“Don't leave me,” he said and she thought he would start to cry, something the man seemed capable of doing at the drop of a hat. “Please, Angie. Please, don't leave me again.”

“I'm just going down the hall to the waiting room, Keith. I'm tired and I've got the headache from hell but I'm not leaving the hospital.”

“Angie . . .” His voice broke.

“Suck it up, Boss Man,” she said and managed to wrestle her hand from his grip. “I’m not going anywhere I told you. You’re stuck with me because you can’t seem to do *anything* right whenever I’m not dogging your ass. I leave Greece and you put your pecker in the first available slick cunt. Then you get roaring drunk and plow your car into a poor, defenseless tree that never hurt anyone in its life until you decided to wrap yourself around it. How could you do that, Rory? The poor thing had to be cut down!”

“I’m sorry, wench,” he said. “I”

“It’s probably firewood for some idiot producer’s bungalow by now.”

“I am so sorry, Angie. I”

“Don’t you say another word,” she warned, her eyes flashing dangerous fire. “Not another goddamned word about it. You understand? I mean it. We won’t discuss it ever again. The death of that poor tree will be on your conscience!”

“Will you forgive me?” he asked, knowing she knew it wasn’t about the tree for which he was begging forgiveness.

“I forgave you when you did it, you moron. That’s because I love your sorry ass, warts, and all,” she said as she walked to the door. She turned and looked back at him. “I just won’t ever forget it, Keith. You’re gonna buy a tree to replace the one you killed!”

With that said she opened the door and walked past his parents, telling them their son needed them.

Epilogue

“Don’t you think fifty thousand dollars was a bit much for a single tree?” Rory asked as he and his wife lay in the double hammock on the deck and looked up at the stars sparkling above Malibu.

“It was sap money, you idjit,” she pronounced. “Sort of like blood money only stickier. A lot of little trees will be born because of your generosity.”

Rory sighed. His arm and leg ached although the casts were off at last. His entire body ached but he didn’t want Angela to know. If she even suspected he was in pain of any kind, she’d get up out of his arms and leave him alone in the stillness of the ocean-misted night.

“Still, fifty-thousand. That’s what I’m saying,” he complained.

They were quiet for awhile and then Angela gasped. “Did you see that?” she asked, lifting a hand to point to the sky.

He’d seen the shooting star and closed his eyes, making an automatic wish. “Aye, I saw it,” he whispered.

Angela thought about the woman who was carrying her husband’s child and wondered if she’d seen the star as it fell from the heavens. Despite hating Velvet MacCarrick with every fiber of her being, she’d made her wish on the star for the little one the starlet carried that it be healthy and strong.

“You know,” Rory said as he lightly stroked her arm. “It’s been nearly two months since the accident and I’m hail and hearty now, wench.”

“Hot and horny is more like it,” she said as his hand moved to her breast to lightly squeeze.

“Aye, well, there is that, too,” he said and as it always did, his accent became more pronounced when he was aroused.

“The doctor says I can have wild monkey sex now if I take it easy.”

Angela smiled in the darkness. “Which means no hanging from the chandelier, I suppose.”

He bent his head to nuzzle her neck. “I need you, wench.”

A part of her wanted to say something mean, to remind him any woman might do, but she stomped down that jealous reaction. Though they had gotten back together again while he’d still been confined to the hospital, they had yet to sleep together in the biblical sense and her body was hungry for his.

“It won’t happen again,” he said as if he knew precisely what she was thinking. “I swear to you, it won’t.”

She turned her head so she was looking into his eyes. “Just so you know,” she said, holding his gaze. “If it does, there won’t be a third chance, Boss Man. I mean that.”

“It won’t happen again,” he repeated. “I was in hell without you, Angie. Nothing and no one is worth my losing you for good.”

Perhaps she shouldn’t have believed him but she did. His heart was in his green gaze. She eased her leg off the side of the hammock and stood up, steadying the canvas so he could get up, as well. She reached for his hand, took it in hers, and then started into the house, leading him to their bedroom.

“You gonna have your wicked way with me now, wench?” he asked in his little boy tone of eagerness that never failed to make her laugh.

“Yeah, Stud Muffin,” she replied. “I’m gonna do terrible things to your dangly.”

“All right!” he said, pumping his fist in the air.

In the bedroom, she turned to face him and put her hand on the buttons of his black cotton shirt. He favored dark clothing and black shirts and black pants had become his trademark on every talk show he did. Slowly, she unbuttoned the shirt then pushed it over his broad shoulders and down his muscular arms, allowing it to drop to the floor. Placing her palms flat on his hairy chest, she caressed his pecs.

“You like to do that, don’t you, wench?” he asked with a wide grin.

“Not as much as you like me to do this,” she said and bent her head to take his nipple into her mouth. She heard him groan and knew he had thrown his head back. He bit her gently and felt his entire body shudder.

“I’ll give you an hour to stop that,” he growled.

She unclasped the waistband of his pants and pushed them down and as she did, his cock jutted out to greet her. Slipping to her knees to tug the pants down, she took him into her mouth and began to draw upon his staff. His hands threaded her hair as she suckled him and ran her tongue up and down his length and across his sac.

He stepped back from her and kicked his pants off, took her shoulders and pulled her up. He tugged the cotton lounging dress she wore over her head, pushed her panties down, and then climbed onto the bed, drawing her with him.

Angela couldn’t take her eyes from the red scar on his flesh where they had removed his ruptured spleen. She worried that he wasn’t up to full strength, but when he pulled her under him and slid atop her, all other thoughts fled from her mind.

“You belong to me, wench,” he said in that husky voice. “I want you to know that always.”

The lovemaking was sweeter than it had ever been. He was gentle with her yet guided her through the most intricate and intense experience she had yet to have with him. His hands gave her so much pleasure she could barely breathe and his mouth and body stirred her to heights of passion she had only imagined. It was almost as though he was worshipping her with his beautiful body and his sensuous voice and would brook nothing but perfection for her.

Angela knew it was also his way of apologizing to her as only he could and a reassurance that he would never again risk losing her.

“I love you,” he told her as he slid that wonderfully delicious cock deep inside her. “With all my being I love you. You are my blood, my life.”

Angela wrapped her legs around him and as the gentle rhythm of their lovemaking became more powerful, more thrusting, the sweet, wild monkey sex he loved to give her rushing toward pure bliss, she put her arms around him and held him tight. The first spasm shook her, caught him to carry him along with her into sheer earthly delight.

“I love you, too, Boss Man,” she whispered to him as they both fell headlong into the throbbing, pulsing, gripping release of passion.

He was--and always would be--the love of her life, her WindStar, her glorious

Rory John.

The End